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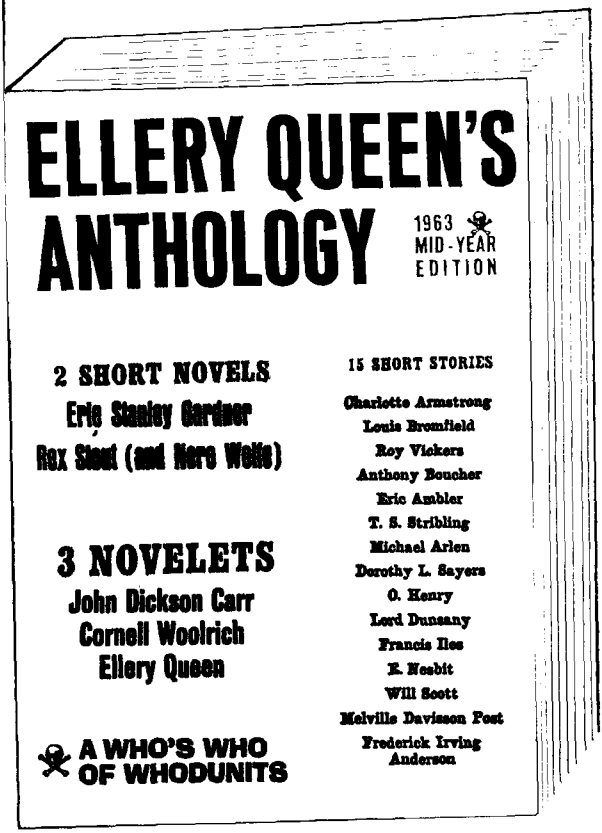

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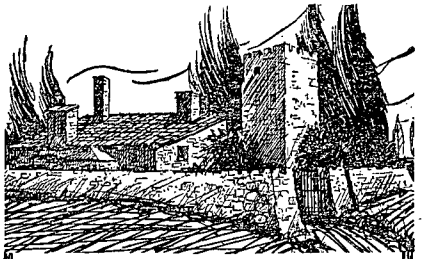

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

a new DR. COFFEE novelette

AUTHOR:	**LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN**
TITLE:	***The Wolf and the Wayward WAC***
TYPE:	Medical Detection
DETECTIVE:	Dr. Daniel Webster Coffee
LOCALE:	Northbank, United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Hail, hail, to the return of Dr. Coffee!—in a breezy, sexy, thoroughly enjoyable medical mystery . . . how modern scientific detection serves the ends of justice . . .*

DR. DANIEL WEBSTER COFFEE, CHIEF pathologist at Pasteur Hospital, frowned as he removed one slide from under the nose of his binocular microscope and substituted another. He couldn't decide whether the section of a growth removed from the wrist of a noted pianist was a sarcoma or a non-malignant tumor. The histological patterns were similar, but the fate of the pianist's right hand depended on Dr. Coffee's diagnosis. He would have fresh sections cut and sent to the Registry of Pathology in Washington. After all, the Registry had thousands of sarcoma cases on file while he saw only two or three a year in Northbank.

He readjusted the focus and called, "Doris!" No answer.

"Doris!" he repeated. "Get me the paraffine blocks on that suspected sarcoma."

Dr. Motilal Mookerji, Pasteur's resident in Pathology and Calcutta's gift to Northbank, waddled to Dr. Coffee's side.

"Am greatly regretful, Doctor Sahib," he said, "but Doris Hudson currently absent from lineup. Can perhaps bat as clutch swatter?"

Dr. Coffee raised startled eyes from the twin lenses. He was startled, not so much by his Hindu resident's locutions (which were increasingly quaint since he had become a baseball fan), but by Doris

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Hudson's absence. Doris was, weight for weight, not only the best lab technologist who ever suckled a pipette, but also the cutest and the most reliable. She had never even been late since the first day she had come to work at Pasteur.

"Doris must be ill," the pathologist said. "Did she telephone?"

"Telephoned indeed," said Dr. Mookerji, wagging his big pink turban twice to the left, "but not to announce illness. Was unavoidably detained at police station."

"Police station?" Dr. Coffee relaxed. "I guess somebody parked a fire hydrant next to her car again." He reached for the phone. "Get me Lieutenant Ritter at police headquarters," he said.

He had just replaced the instrument when Doris Hudson swept into the lab like a fugitive hurricane rushing from the Gulf of Mexico, courtesy of Schiaparelli. She shed her raincoat, flung her handbag to the workbench, and started to tear off the damp wisp of felt and feathers which she obviously considered a hat. Suddenly, remembering a recent visit to the hairdresser, she became calm and careful.

"You have to do something, Doctor," she almost shouted as she reached for her white smock. "And quick. You have to help Ruth."

"Ruth?" Dr. Coffee echoed vaguely.

"Ruth Andrews." Doris was scornful. "Don't you remember Ruth Andrews who worked in bacteriology until last month?"

"Yes, of course. What's wrong with Ruth?"

"She's losing her mind," Doris said. Then, noting a curious expression on Dr. Coffee's face, she added, "And don't tell me you're a pathologist, not a psychiatrist. Ruth quit her job to marry an Army officer—remember, Doctor? Well, the wedding was set for next week, but the man she's going to marry has just been arrested for murder. As you can well imagine, she's frantic. You've got to do something."

"Now wait a minute, Doris." The pathologist ran his long fingers through his unruly mop of jute-colored hair. "Do I know the fiancé? And who is he supposed to have killed?"

Doris made an impatient gesture with both hands. "Ruth introduced you to Captain Buford the day she resigned," she said. "Joe Buford. He's accused of shooting an ex-Wac named May Marling that he used to— well, they were quite close before he met Ruth. And don't say Joe Buford needs a lawyer, not a pathologist, because the lawyer Ruth got for him thinks he did it. The lawyer wants him to plead guilty to manslaughter so he won't get the chair. But why should he plead guilty if he's innocent? Doctor, please call Max Ritter. It's his case. He certainly owes you plenty, so maybe he'll listen to you. Will you call him?"

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"On one condition," Dr. Coffee said. "Cut me some fresh sections from that suspected sarcoma."

The telephone rang.

"Pathology," Doris answered. "Oh, hello, Lieutenant. I didn't know you were psychic . . . He did? " She gave Dr. Coffee a surprised glance. "Then *he's* psychic. Just a moment." She thrust the receiver at Dr. Coffee.

"Hello, Max," the pathologist said. "I understand you're trying to railroad an innocent young man—he is, is he? . . . A wolf? . . . I'm glad you were going to call me, Max. I thought you were holding out on me, after all we've been through together . . . This morning? Hang on." He turned to his technologist. "Doris, did you look at the surgical board when you came in?"

"Four laparotomies," Doris said. "Two tonsilectomies and a D. and C. No biopsies scheduled."

"Okay, Max," Dr. Coffee told the telephone. "I'll go out with you to the deceased's apartment. Pick me up in half an hour."

The police car stopped at the doctor's entrance to Pasteur Hospital and Dr. Coffee climbed in beside the gaunt, dark, beagle-eyed detective of the homicide squad.

"Tell me why you think it's an open and shut case, Max," Dr. Coffee said as the car started off again. "Begin at the beginning."

"I ain't so sure it's open and shut any more," Lieutenant Ritter said, "but it looked simple enough at first. The Case of the Wolf and the Wayward Wac, you might say. This Captain Buford has been practicing calesthenics with this redhead May Marling for some months when he dumps her to marry some other dame. This redhead don't like getting dumped. Apparently she threatens to bust up the captain's nuptials, so he shoots her."

"Has Captain Buford confessed?" Dr. Coffee asked.

"Well, no. Matter of fact, he denies everything except that he used to share May's pillow from time to time. But right now, it's May's word against the General's."

The General, Max explained, was Brigadier-General Spencer H. Spence, chief of an army mission that had set up headquarters in Northbank while exploring the countryside for a site for a new induction center, munitions dump, or similar classified project. The Spence mission was housed in a duplex suite which occupied the second and third floors of a downtown office building. May Marling was killed in a second-floor office.

"General Spence has his office at the head of the stairs on the third floor," Max Ritter said. "When he hears the shot, he steps out and sees this Captain Buford busting out of a second-floor office and running down the stairs. He rushes down one flight and finds red-headed May in what he calls a 'characteristic

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pose'—horizontal. Only she's dead. So, May being a civilian and the scene of the crime being civilian premises, the General calls the Northbank police. The time is four fifty-five p.m.

"Eight minutes later I'm there. The dame is horizontal, all right. She's lying on her back with her skirt sort of accordion-pleated crosswise halfway up her thighs. She's still warm and her skin hasn't started turning to gray wax yet, so the view ain't too depressing. I also note that her sky-blue silk blouse is ripped down the front, popping three buttons."

"Now Max." Dr. Coffee pursed his lips incredulously. "You're not going to tell me you think this was a sex crime."

"Confidentially, no, Doc," said the detective. "According to the book, there's hardly ever any of that in offices with open doors and traffic in the hall and stairway. And when there's a history of probably previous intimacy—I talk like a lawyer, don't I, Doc?"

"But the redhead *was* killed in Captain Buford's office?"

"Well, no. She was killed in Major Thissel's office, right next to Buford's. Funny thing, she's killed with Major Thissel's service revolver, too. I find it on the floor next to the body. But the General says Thissel always keeps his gun in an unlocked drawer of his desk, and he swears the Major is out on a special errand, but he won't say what. The Major's mission in Northbank is classified, he says—so Thissel can't establish an alibi."

"What about the office on the other side of Major Thissel's?"

"That's Lieutenant Quail's—First Lieutenant Frank Quail. He wasn't in his office either, the General says."

"Who is this bird Quail?"

"The General's finance officer," the detective replied. "I checked his alibi. He's on the other side of the river at the exact time the General hears the shot that kills the ex-Wac. He's clean."

"Max," said Dr. Coffee as the car started climbing the road leading to Northbank's fashionable Heights, "what was May Marling doing in Major Thissel's office?"

"A very good question, Doc. I ask it myself. The answer is kind of complicated. Seems she is lured. Major Thissel says he can't answer because it ain't in the interest of national security, but Captain Buford says May hints she got a call to be in the Major's office at four o'clock —to make sure she's not in places where the U.S. Army is conducting an investigation. So we're kind of handicapped till Buford comes to trial and we can subpoena three tongue-tied warriors."

"Look, Max." Dr. Coffee frowned. "This case has more holes than a wheel of Emmenthaler cheese. You're really not going to charge a man with murder on such flimsy evidence, are you?"

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"General Spence will have a litter of calico kittens if he hears you call his testimony flimsy. Right now we're holding Captain Buford only on suspicion, but we got to charge him pretty soon. The General is pressuring the D.A. . . . Here we are, Doc. The domicile of the defunct doxy."

The police car had stopped in front of a magnified replica of Westminster Abbey (twice natural size) guarded by two uniformed doormen wearing more gold than Fort Knox and more medals than a Russian astronaut.

"I was here last night with the print boys," Ritter said as they got out of the car, "but the place was pretty crowded. I don't think they found anything, because after all, the murder ain't committed here. But I get the idea maybe you might find something in the kitchen or bathroom medicine chest—the way you did in that Joe Dark murder. Do you mind, Doc?"

"Mind? Max, you know that for years I've been madly in love—with the truth."

The late May Marling's apartment was something out of a dreamworld—a nightmare in which ambition and extravagance fought desperately with tastelessness and immature imitation. The sunken living room was furnished with shoddy imitation antiques and ankle-deep wall-to-wall carpeting. The walls were hung with heraldic fanions, regimental flags of U.S. units and tattered insignia from enemy aircraft shot down by May's friends.

Sauntering through the apartment, Dr. Coffee blinked at the bedroom's cascading pillows, patchwork slips made up of the shoulder patches worn in the World Wars and a police action in Korea. The kaleidescope of color inundated all the furniture including an outsize Louis XV bed canopied in apricot satin.

Dr. Coffee invaded the bathroom to examine the medicine cabinet, so often indicative, but was overwhelmed at first by the squadrons of model fighters and bombers dangling from the ceiling, and by the gallery of helmeted airmen whose photos lined the walls shoulder to shoulder, staring down into the empty bathtub. Dr. Coffee had just begun to inventory the bottles and vials in the medicine chest when a loud and profane exclamation from Max Ritter recalled him to the next room.

"Doc, give a look!" the detective said. "Somebody's been here since I left last night. Look at the drawers in the Looie Cans secretary. They been rifled. And the breakfront. And all those books that nobody ever read—pulled out of the bookcases."

"Didn't you post a guard here last night, Max?"

"What for? This ain't the murder scene. And besides we find everything we're looking for."

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"Except the murderer, Max. But you're probably right. I doubt if the murderer would have come back if you had one of your boys in blue standing at the portals."

Ritter swallowed hard, and his magnificent Adam's apple bobbed twice in his long throat. "Why would he come back here anyhow, Doc?"

"Why did he practically undress the corpse? Why did he rip open the girl's blouse? Where does a woman hide things? And what would a man do who killed a woman to get something he expected to find secreted on her person—and found nothing?"

The detective nodded. "Maybe you got something there, Doc. What do you suppose this guy Buford is after?"

"That, Max, is a question for a cop, not a pathologist. But since I promised Doris I'd help get to the bottom of this, I'll try to find your answer. First of all, I want to talk to Captain Buford. I also want to talk to the General, to Major Thissel, and to Lieutenant Quail. And I want to know everything you've found out about May Marling."

"I'm ahead of you, Doc." Ritter grinned and reached into his inside coat pocket. "I brought you carbons of my reports. You can read 'em tonight."

Within 48 hours Dr. Coffee thought he had a pretty fair grasp of The Case of the Wayward Wac. After reading Ritter's reports he had interviewed all the obvious principals. His interview with the victim was perforce one-sided, since it was conducted posthumously—the pathologist had easily persuaded the three-chinned, red-faced, pinochle-playing coroner to let him do the autopsy—yet it produced more pertinent information than did either the reluctant monosyllables which General Spence confided into the telephone or the cryptic remarks of Major Harry Thissel.

The life of the deceased, Dr. Coffee decided, had been blighted at birth when Mr. and Mrs. Flowers, her whimsical parents, had christened her "May." Escape from the legal cognomen of May Flowers must have been at least partial motivation for her marriage to Master-Sergeant Bill Marling, a breach of regulations for which she had been tossed out of the Women's Army Corps after a year's service. Why else should a girl of her dazzling physical endowments have married a rather unprepossessing noncom—her subsequent behavior indicated no overwhelming love—instead of one of the many handsome young officers who had been pursuing her?

Why, in fact, had she joined the Wacs in the first place? She would have looked more at home in the spangled bikini of a chorus line than in olive drab, although apparently she had been able to coax

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more tantalizing appeal from a Wac uniform than most girls could from black-lace pretties.

At any rate, soon after the wedding, Master-Sergeant Marling had gone off to Laos with the U.S. Military Mission and had promptly disappeared en route from Vientiane to Padong by air. "Missing and presumed dead," the Defense Department had wired May.

May Marling had made a most attractive widow, if not a very mournful one. Her gentlemen friends who rallied round nobly to console her were pleased to note that May, who had formerly been both subtly provocative and demure, was no longer subtle *or* demure once she had collected Sergeant Marling's GI insurance and signed papers for a widow's pension. She became a laughing, dashing, beguiling figure at the Wild Blue Yonder Bar and Grill, a sort of unofficial junior officers' club near McAbrams Air Force Base across the river from Northbank.

She also moved into the plush apartment on the Heights for which her widow's pension could not have covered more than maid service, gas, and light, and perhaps tips for the elegant doormen. Such incidentals as rent, food, drink, garage, furs, Dior originals, and payments on a Jaguar—all these she had apparently left to Providence.

The identity of the agents of Providence was a mystery. Despite her many gentlemen friends, May had apparently never entertained (intimately, at least) any officer of field-grade rank or above, and she did not seem to be polyandrous. And although the normal rotation of officer personnel was obviously sufficient to furnish May with the spice of life, it hardly seemed capable of supplying the staples, let alone the luxuries, to which the Widow Marling had become accustomed.

Studying May's romantic roster as prepared by Max Ritter, Dr. Coffee noted a marked favoritism for the Air Force, although May had not been snobbish about it. In fact, since General Spence's mission had set up shop in Northbank, May had gone out of her way to brighten the lonely nights of some of his younger officers, notably Captain Joe Buford. And Captain Buford had repaid her generous hospitality, according to General Spence, with death.

"No doubt about it, Coffee," the General had insisted on the telephone. "Buford shot the girl. I heard the shot and I saw him with my own eyes when he came out of the office and ran down the stairs. No, Coffee, there's no use of our meeting because there's nothing I could tell you that I haven't told to that detective. I've already been subpoenaed to testify before the Grand Jury, and that's enough. Goodbye."

Dr. Coffee had wanted a look at the young captain so peremptorily

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condemned by General Spence, so Max Ritter had arranged an interview at Northbank County Jail. Buford spoke freely and apparently frankly. A handsome, blue-eyed, fair-haired Southerner who had managed to lose his grits-and-drippin's accent, Buford was a product of V.M.I. He had won his first lieutenancy in Germany, his captain's bars in Japan, and manifold feminine hearts in the intervening longitudes. After the blonde buxomness of the fräuleins and the dark, glossy, stylized ardor of Tokyo's night-blooming *beppin,* the All-American, free-wheeling, hoyden approach of red-headed May Marling had been like a whiff of new-mown hay on the banks of the Wabash. So Captain Buford had made hay and May had taken him into her heart and oversized bed.

The captain had not been in love with May—he had never been in love with anyone when he met May. He had accepted the favors of any woman as his just due. Although he thoroughly enjoyed the warmth, talents, and natural charms of the ex-Wac, he felt no obligation toward her other than his contribution of transient affection and an occasional minuscule financial gesture. When he fell in love with Ruth Andrews, he had had no compunction about dropping May. He was sure that May had understood. Ruth was an unspoiled, honest-to-God girl-next-door type that any man might want to marry.

"Didn't you ever promise to marry May Marling?" Dr. Coffee asked.

"Never."

"Didn't she tell you that she was in trouble and demand that you make an honest woman of her?"

"She never mentioned marriage. We never discussed it."

"Didn't she threaten to go to your fiancée with the whole story of your liaison?"

"What for?" Captain Buford asked. "Ruth knew all about May. I told her everything before I asked her to marry me. Ruth isn't jealous of the past."

"Even so, didn't May Marling try to blackmail you? Didn't she ask you for money?"

"Money?" The captain laughed. "May knew exactly how much a captain gets—$415 a month base pay, $85.50 quarters allowance, and $47.88 subsistence." He laughed again. "We used to blow the whole subsistence money on one night out."

"You of course had a key to Mrs. Marling's apartment," Dr. Coffee said.

"I gave it back two or three months ago. It had a gold-plated heart-shaped thumbpiece set with a ruby."

"And who has his thumb on the ruby now?"

Buford shook his head. "I could guess," he said, "but I'd rather not."

"I got a list from the doorman," Ritter volunteered. "Lieutenant

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Quail's leading the field, looks like."

A guard approached with a jangle of keys. "Time's up," he said.

"One more question," Dr. Coffee said. "Did I understand you to say you hadn't seen May Marling in two or three months?"

"No, I didn't say that. I've seen her since."

"When was the last time?"

"The day she was shot."

"Where?"

"In Major Thissel's office."

"Then General Spence is right when he says he saw you leave Major Thissel's office and run down the stairs."

"No, he's not. I left the office a little after four o'clock. The General says he heard the shot and saw me run down the stairs nearly an hour later."

"But you had an appointment to meet May Marling?"

"No. I just happened to see her in the Major's office as I passed. I stepped in to say hello. I was on my way to meet my fiancée."

"What was Mrs. Marling doing in Major Thissel's office?"

"She said the Major had sent for her. She said she had something important to tell him—no, she didn't say what. It must have been pretty important if May waited all that time. She doesn't—didn't like to be kept waiting."

"You sure you didn't keep your fiancée waiting?" Max Ritter asked.

"Positive. I met her at four thirty sharp. You can ask her."

"I already did," Ritter said. "Too bad your date wasn't with somebody else, Captain. A fiancée's alibi don't go down too well with a jury."

"That's all, gents," the guard said. "Time's up."

When the pathologist returned to his laboratory, Doris Hudson questioned him with her eyes.

"It's too early to tell, Doris," Dr. Coffee said. "He has a nice, innocent smile, but the odds are against him. If our friend Ruth is a religious girl, tell her she better pray."

"Thanks for seeing him, Doctor," Doris said. "There's a Lieutenant Quail waiting in your office. He says you phoned him. He's anxious to do anything he can to help your investigation, he says. I hope it was all right to let him wait inside."

Dr. Coffee nodded absently and stepped into his office. A towheaded young officer jumped to attention.

"I'm Lieutenant Quail, sir. I told the police—"

"Yes, I know. You told the police you wanted to help hang the blankety-blank guy that shot your girl friend. Were you in love with May Marling?"

"Yes, sir. We were going to be married."

"The police say they already have the murderer. Don't you agree?"

"Well . . ." Quail shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

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"Sit down, Lieutenant," said Dr. Coffee, slipping behind his desk. "Well, what? Do you think General Spence is lying?"

"Oh, no, sir. Nobody doubts General Spence. But—" Lieutenant Quail remained standing. "I know the General's theory about Joe Buford's motivation sounds logical, except I don't think May would have —I mean, is it true that you did a post-mortem on poor May?"

"Yes."

"Then you must know—I mean, was she—?" He stopped, his lips parted on the last word. He flushed to the roots of his wheat-colored crewcut.

Dr. Coffee studied the young officer's obvious perturbation, trying to analyze the cause. It was possible, of course, that Quail had actually been in love with the ex-Wac and was seriously stirred by a compulsion to avenge her death. There seemed to be no apparent element of grief in his reactions. If Max Ritter had not verified the lad's alibi —Quail said he was at the Wild Blue Yonder Bar at the time May Marling was shot, and the tavernkeeper had confirmed the fact—Dr. Coffee might have laid the officer's tenseness to another kind of involvement.

"Is that why you came to see me?" Dr. Coffee asked. "To find out if May Marling was pregnant?" Mentally, he amended the questions: *And to find out, if the answer is yes, whether it would be possible to tell by the stage of the embryo, which of the two was the father?*

"Oh, no, sir." Lieutenant Quail colored again. "I came to tell you about Major Thissel, in case you didn't know. You've talked to Major Thissel, of course?"

Dr. Coffee nodded. He had talked to the Major, and Max Ritter had talked to the Major, but the Major had done very little talking to either of them. He admitted speaking to May Marling on several occasions but refused to discuss the subject of their conversation on the grounds that it was classified information affecting the national security. He admitted that the gun which had killed May was issued to him but denied that he had been in the office at the time. He also denied he had any idea what May was doing in his office. He also refused to say where he had been at the moment of the murder, also on security grounds.

"What about Major Thissel?" Dr. Coffee prodded.

"He's gone back to Washington," said Lieutenant Quail.

"He's—what?"

"He left Northbank for the airfield about an hour ago. I guess he's halfway to Washington by now."

"Why, that—! And General Spence promised—!" The pathologist reached for the phone.

"The Major is really not under General Spence's command," Quail said. "He was only here on assignment from the C.I.D. in Washing-

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ton. He finished his investigation, so he went home."

Dr. Coffee's hand was still on the phone when it rang.

"Pathology," he said. "Oh, hello, Max. I was just going to call you. Major Thissel— You did? . . . The airfield? . . . I see . . . Really? . . . I'll be damned! . . . He will, eh? . . . Maybe you'd better set up a meeting with the General. Or I will . . . Okay, Max, I'll wait for you here."

The pathologist replaced the instrument and turned to Quail.

"Major Thissel will return to Northbank if his testimony is needed," he said. "That was Detective Ritter of Homicide at the airfield. I suppose you know the Major was here to investigate reported irregularities in the finances of General Spence's unit."

"Yes, sir."

"You're General Spence's finance officer, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"How much were your accounts short?"

"They weren't short at all, sir. There was an apparent shortage of ten thousand dollars, but it was all a mistake. Some Wac corporal must have punched the wrong key on the adding machine. It didn't take Major Thissel long to find out that the money was in the bank, all right, and that the books balanced. He found the error and went home."

"Yes, well . . ." Dr. Coffee stood up and extended his hand. "Thanks for coming in," he said. "And as for that question that you didn't quite ask, the answer is—no, she wasn't."

The round, brown face and pink turban of Dr. Mookerji appeared in the doorway as Lieutenant Quail left.

"Am delegated by Miss Hudson, who cannot interrupt current counting of red blood cells," said the Hindu, "to inquire as to present life expectancy of Captain Joesph Buford, U.S.A."

"You may tell Doris," said Dr. Coffee, grinning, "that the captain's prospects of longevity are unchanged."

The day before the Northbank County Grand Jury was set to indict Buford for the murder of May Flowers Marling, General Spence condescended to have lunch with Dr. Coffee and Max Ritter. To Dr. Coffee the luncheon represented Captain Buford's last chance. From what he had learned of the General, the Grand Jury would believe him implicitly.

Brigadier-General Spencer H. Spence, the pathologist had discovered, liked to think of himself as a General's General. He was certainly not a soldier's General. He had never commanded anything except enforced respect—it would do a GI no good to cross the street to avoid saluting, because the General would cross, too—and divers projects of

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military procurement and construction.

None of the ribbons in the "fruit salad" adorning his well-tailored chest was for combat, yet the General was a fierce fighter for the prerogatives of his rank and for what he considered a fair shake for the Army. The Army was a way of life to which war and heroics were only incidentally related—a haven from competition and a sure if slow road to security. He had performed unspectacularly in the housekeeping branches of the service, but the tedious routine of promotion had at last elevated him to one-star rank.

Now that he had reached a somewhat flabby and pasty-faced fifty-eight, he was no doubt looking forward wistfully to a second star so that he could retire with the increased pay of Major-General. In any event, whatever his lack of imagination and martial glory, the General's integrity was above reproach. And if he testified that he had seen Captain Buford running from the scene of May Marling's murder, the Captain's goose was already in the oven.

Goose just happened to be the specialty of the house at Raoul's the day the General came to lunch with Dr. Coffee and Max Ritter. Raoul was a red-faced black-mustached Norman who ran a two-by-four restaurant one flight up, around the corner from the Barzac soup cannery in the grimy industrial section of Northbank. Every Wednesday Raoul served *Cassoulet Toulousain*—goose simmered in a great earthenware pot with white beans, lamb, sausages, and onions stuck with cloves—and the air of the little place was bright with the fragrance of garlic, thyme, and laurel.

Dr. Coffee arrived early and chose a table overlooking the top of the stairway. He had just told Raoul to chill two bottles of Livermore Valley Pinot Blanc when Max Ritter arrived and pulled out a chair opposite. The pathologist waved him off.

"Sit over here, Max. Do you mind? I'm saving that for the General."

The detective blinked. "What gives?" he asked. "Is this chair bugged or something?"

"I want the General to sit opposite me," Dr. Coffee said. "I have a theory which is probably all wrong, but I want to give it a test. Have you anything to report?"

"A couple of things," Ritter said. "First, this Major Thissel opens up to me before he flies to Washington and admits he give us a wrong answer when he said he didn't know what May was doing in his office. She's there because he sends for her. He wants to keep her waiting so he can run through her apartment with no audience. This is before the murder, so he's not the guy who leaves the place looking like a rummage sale the morning after. His chauffeur makes an affidavit. Seems

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the Major thinks he might find some clue to where's the ten grand missing from the General's accounts. Only the ten grand ain't missing after all."

"What made Major Thissel think it was?" Dr. Coffee asked.

"The General thinks he spots a shortage and yells for C.I.D. help. Another thing. I find out where May Marling's dough comes from. She owns a big piece of the Wild Blue Yonder Bar and Grill. Buys it with the late Sergeant Marling's GI insurance money and maybe a smile or two for the Blue Yonder boss."

"Is a bar and grill that kind of gold mine, Max?"

"Wild Blue Yonder is. Gambling upstairs. Big stuff. Roulette, craps, blackjack, faro—take your pick. And the redhead makes a fine shill. Ex-Fighter Pilot name of Jack White runs the joint. He's the guy arranging the redhead's funeral. I got a stakeout on him."

"Do you think Jack White profited financially from May's death?"

"I'm checking. But White sure as hell ain't the guy the General sees running down the stairs. He's a husky bruiser, twice the size of Buford, and dark as an Arab. Hey, here come's the General now."

General Spence emerged from the doorway, patently out of breath. He paused a moment, looking around the room with ill-concealed distaste. When he spotted Ritter, he headed for the table. He was not a big man but his cocky bearing seemed to increase his stature. He walked with a curious, jerky gait, Dr. Coffee noted, kicking out his toes slightly with each step. He nodded his greetings without shaking hands and sat down to pant audibly for a moment.

Dr. Coffee leaned across the table solicitously, hoping he would not appear to be smelling the General's breath.

"Something long and cool to drink, General?" he suggested. "I'm afraid Raoul doesn't have a Martini license. Some wine, maybe?"

"A tall glass of water, please," said General Spence. "I'll have a little wine later."

The General had more than a little wine later. In fact, both bottles were empty by the time the casserole had been emptied of its goose and beans, the flakes of French bread crust swept from the red-and-white checked tablecloth, and the General had repeated for the ninth time that he was convinced that Captain Buford had killed May Marling and that he was certainly going to testify to that effect before the Grand Jury next day.

"The autopsy showed the girl wasn't pregnant," Dr. Coffee said. "That sort of removes the motive you attribute to the Captain, doesn't it, General?"

"Not if she told him she was in a family way. How would he know she was lying?"

"There's one point that's not

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quite clear to me," Dr. Coffee said. "You say you saw Captain Buford burst from Major Thissel's office after you heard the shot, and that he ran down the stairs and out of the building. Now the street entrance is immediately opposite the foot of the stairs, is it not?"

"It is."

"So that Captain Buford had to turn neither to the right nor left to exit to the street?"

"That is correct."

"He didn't look back to see if anybody was following him?"

"He did not."

"In other words, you saw him only from above and from the back. You didn't see his face."

"I don't remember if I did or not. But it was certainly Buford."

"Aren't you just a little reluctant, General, in a matter of life and death, to positively identify a man whose face you didn't see?"

"My dear Coffee." The General smiled condescendingly. "I am so familiar with the officers of my command that I can recognize any of them by a gesture, by the way he walks or carries his head. And Buford happens to be the only captain in my outfit with light-colored hair."

"Are you sure the insignia—?"

"I'm positive, I tell you. I have twenty-twenty vision. Never wore glasses in my life. And even a blind man can see a captain's bars at ten paces."

Dr. Coffee seemed to be studying his empty wine glass which he turned slowly in his fingers. "General," he said, "I wonder if you would do us both a favor. Come back to my lab with me now."

"Now?" The General glanced at his wrist and squirmed in his seat. "Impossible. I'm already late for an appointment."

"Later this afternoon then?"

"What for?" The General stood up. "I see no reason—"

"It won't take more than a few moments, General, and I promise that this will be strictly private—between you and me. I'd like a sample of your blood."

"My blood? Certainly not!"

"I strongly advise you to come, General," the pathologist said quietly. "Otherwise I may be forced to give medical testimony before the Grand Jury tomorrow that you may find rather disagreeable."

"I'll not be blackmailed!"

"This is a matter of life and death, General—not only for Captain Buford, but possibly for you."

Tight-lipped, General Spence glowered.

"I'm at Pasteur Hospital, General. I'll be in my lab until six thirty this evening," Dr. Coffee said.

"Don't stay on my account," the General said. "Thank you for the lunch. Afternoon, gentlemen."

As General Spence's steel-gray crewcut disappeared into the stairway, Max Ritter leaned over to watch his descent.

"Hey, he didn't go out," Ritter

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reported. "He turned back toward the phone booth. Who do you think he's going to phone?"

"Nobody, Max. The Men's Room is also in that direction."

The detective frowned. "What do you think, Doc?"

"I think he'll come to see me today," the pathologist said. "I also think there's a sixty per cent chance the Grand Jury won't indict Buford tomorrow—one hundred per cent if you can dig up a good substitute suspect. Can you, Max, in less than twenty-four hours?"

Ritter grunted. He shrugged. He rubbed his long nose. Then: "Any ideas, Doc?"

"Just the ones you've given me. First, find what the murderer was looking for on May Marling's person and in her apartment. Where? Well, you mentioned a possibility before lunch. What about May's partner?"

"Yeah." Ritter nodded. "I thought of the Wild Blue Yonder. But this Jack White is a tough baby and he don't have what you might call a soft underbelly. His joint is across the river in a different state. The cops and sheriff's office on the other side ain't very cooperative with the Northbank police. I don't say they're corrupt or anything, but they just think gambling's no worse than a bad cold."

"Then why not short-circuit the cops and the sheriff's office? I doubt if Jack White can subvert the U. S. Air Force. Didn't you say, Max, that most of his clientele comes from McAbrams Field?"

"Doc, you're a genius! I'll throw the Air Force at him. Cooperate, or the Wild Blue Yonder is off limits to all military personnel. 'Bye, Doc. Call you later."

Dr. Coffee puckered his lips in a silent whistle as he jotted figures on his desk pad.

"Most revealing," said Dr. Motilal Mookerji, peering over his shoulder.

When he heard his office door open, Dr. Coffee looked up to see Doris Hudson.

"You still here?" the pathologist asked. "I'll report you to your union for staying overtime without time-and-a-half pay. Why don't you go home, Doris?"

"You know very well why," Doris said. "Wasn't that General Spence who just walked out of the lab, looking white around the gills?"

"Your powers of observation are most acute, Doris."

"Then it was the General's blood sample that Dr. Mookerji ran through the photoelectric colorimeter. Blood-sugar estimation, wasn't it?"

"Yes on both counts, Doris."

"I peeked at the reading," the girl said. "Rather high—no?"

Dr. Coffee nodded. "About twice normal," he said.

"Does the General's blood sugar have anything to do with getting Captain Joe Buford out of jail?"

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"In a way, yes."

"In what way, Doctor? Good or bad?"

Dr. Coffee raised his eyebrows at his Hindu assistant who said, "For General Spence, bad. For Captain Buford, good, I think."

Doris tried to read Dr. Mookerji's face, which was more expressive than his reply. She thought she caught a smile.

"Can I call Ruth, Doctor?"

"Hold on, Doris. Not so fast. All I've done so far is persuade General Spence not to testify before the Grand Jury tomorrow. What happens next depends on the D.A."

The ringing phone interrupted him. Dr. Coffee's grab was quicker than Doris Hudson's.

"Pathology," he said. "Hello, Max. Did you—?" He leaned back, listening. He could not have looked more smugly pleased if he had just discovered the cause of the common cold. "Good boy, Max . . . He will? . . . Fine! . . . Well, I guess that wraps it up. . . . Sure, Max. I'll be here."

He hung up, still very smug.

"Well?" asked Doris anxiously.

"Well what, Doris?"

"That was Lieutenant Ritter."

"Great stars, Doris, I can't hide a thing from you, can I?"

"Doctor, you're mean! Stop torturing me and tell me what Max said."

"Max? Oh, he said he was being unavoidably detained at the District Attorney's office."

"Doctor, stop! What did he say about Joe Buford?"

"Oh, yes. Buford." Dr. Coffee chuckled. "Maybe you'd better phone Ruth after all: Tell her to put on her prettiest dress and hurry down to the county jail. They're going to turn her sweetie-pie loose in about half an hour."

"Doctor, you angel! I knew you'd do it! You better plan on a champagne supper tonight. I know Ruth and Joe are going to want to thank you."

"They'd better thank Max Ritter, Doris. He's the one who dug up the real culprit. He's at the D.A.'s office now, swearing to a homicide complaint."

"And who, please," asked Dr. Mookerji, "is felonious murderer?"

"That's for the courts to decide," Dr. Coffee said, "but the warrant is for the arrest of Lieutenant Frank Quail."

Dr. Coffee and Max Ritter did not have a champagne supper. Instead they were back at Raoul's eating eels stewed in red wine and drinking Corton 1945 while the detective told his story.

"You were right about this guy Jack White," Ritter said. "He had what the murderer was looking for, all right. But he don't open up till I tell him the Wild Blue Yonder is going to be off-limits unless he plays ball. I also tell him that giving a bum alibi to a murderer is not only perjury but makes him an acces-

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sory to murder after the fact and that he can be extradited. Besides, I think he's a little soft on May Marling himself. Anyhow, he says he's only doing a favor for a good customer and would never poke sticks between the spokes of the wheels of justice. So he tells all.

"Seems this bird Quail drops a wad—but a real wad—playing blackjack at the Wild Blue Yonder. He's trying to make an impression on this May Marling while she's still Buford's baby-doll. And when Buford moves out, Quail moves in—and the redhead really falls for Quail. When he tells her the ten G's he dropped at the blackjack table is Army money he sneaked out of General Spence's till and that Washington is going to investigate, she covers up for him. She gives him the dough so the accounts will balance for Major Thissel, but she does it by a check made out to Quail personally—and she keeps the canceled check.

"Then she finds out that Quail is going to run out on her, too. He applies for a transfer without telling her, but she has her own CIA. The Wild Blue Yonder intelligence network keeps her up to the minute. So she gets mad. So that's the way he's going to pay her back for saving his skin, is it? Well, okay, so two can play dirty! When she gets word that Major Thissel wants to see her, she decides to tell all. Only she leaves the canceled check with White for safekeeping.

"And what does Quail think when he sees her waiting in the Major's office? That she's bringing the check to show to Thissel. She may even have told him she was. You know how redheads are. So he kills her to get it, because he wants to stay out of jail and in the Army. And when he don't find it, he ransacks her apartment. He's got a key, remember.

"Well, Jack White admits the alibi he gives Quail is phony. He thought he was just doing Quail a favor to keep him out of some minor trouble with the Army. And he turns over the check which is now in the D.A.'s safe."

"Does the D.A. buy that story, Max?" the pathologist asked.

"He buys the evidence of the canceled check," Ritter replied, "and Jack White's promise to testify. But what I want to know, Doc, is how you blackmailed the General out of testifying."

"I didn't blackmail him, Max. We made a deal. Look, Max, when two people tell opposite stories, either one is lying or one is mistaken. I was sure both Buford and the General thought they were telling the truth. Where, then, was the margin for error?

"When I saw Buford and Quail, I thought I knew. Here were two light-haired young officers who, seen from the back and above, must have looked alike to General Spence *—except for their shoulder bars.* Suppose the General was suffering

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from diplopia?—that's double vision, Max. He would have seen First Lieutenant Quail's *single* silver shoulder insignia as a captain's *double* bar. And his only tow-headed captain was Buford. All right. Assuming this to be true, what could have caused the General's double vision? I decided I had to see the General.

"When he climbed the stairs at Raoul's, I was pretty sure I had the answer. First of all, he had a little trouble with the stairs. He was short of breath and his legs didn't seem too serviceable. And he kicked out his toes when he walked. When he sat down, he breathed noisily for a moment, and I could detect the fruit odor of acetone on his breath. He was terribly thirsty, and he was in a hurry to leave us—to go to the Men's Room.

"All these symptoms add up to a typical picture, Max. The loss of power in his legs, the disappearance of the knee reflex, his air hunger—dyspnoea—and the fruity breath—ketosis—it all spells diabetes. And another symptom of diabetes is frequently double vision. That would explain the General's honest error in identifying a lieutenant—whose face he hadn't seen—as a captain. To make sure, I had to test his blood sugar."

"How could you be so sure he'd come to your lab?" Ritter asked.

"The General knew something was wrong with him, Max. He couldn't help feeling it. I scared him when I said it was a matter of life and death for him as well as for Buford. He certainly wasn't going to commit suicide, particularly when the alternative was my telling a Grand Jury there was something wrong with him physically. You see, the reason the General didn't go to an Army hospital for a check-up was that he was afraid they'd give him a medical discharge from the service. He wanted badly to hang on until retirement age on the chance that he could pick up that extra star and retire with the rank—and pay—of a Major-General.

"I told the General he was risking his life by not going on insulin immediately—if further tests confirmed my blood-sugar estimation. He really should go through the fasting, test meal, and glucose tolerance routine. It's none of my business if he wants to go to a civilian physician instead of checking in at Walter Reed. I told him that if he insisted on telling the Grand Jury he had seen Captain Buford running away from the murder room, I should be forced to rebut his testimony on medical grounds. I was counting on you, of course, Max, to come up with the real culprit. You wouldn't call that blackmail, would you, Max?"

"I'd call that serving the ends of justice," the detective said.

"Good. Then pour me some more of that Corton, Max," Dr. Coffee said, "and let's drink to the ends of justice."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

(a story in verse)

This is the 250th "first story" to appear in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, but this one could be called a "first first"—it is the first "first story" we've ever published in rhyme!

The author is in his mid-thirties, has been married "to a gal (I) could be happy with for 500 years," and has four stepchildren—Gail, Greta, Glenda, and Gregg. His chief hobby is ham radio—he operates a short-wave station, mostly in telegraphy, with the call letters (cute!) W6RTE. His chief ambition? Let Mr. Dart speak for himself: "More than anything I want to write short stories . . . I'm working at a bank now, doing clerical work, and I've been everything from a multilith press operator to a packer in a cannery; but none of these things is what I am *. . . I'm a writer, and I have to hang on to that in my mind, because rejection slips pile up and up and up . . . If my stories ever say something, that's fine; if they only make people laugh, that's fine, too."*

Here is Mr. Dart's debut as a storyteller, and we think his first "story" will make people laugh, or at least chuckle . . . and in this "crazy" world, that's fine!

THE INGENIOUS JONATHAN JONES

by LAREN DART

Jonathan Jones bought for his mate
A shiny, luxurious Finnytail-8.
He parked it with care in front of the house,
Then rushed to the door to summon his spouse.

She viewed it with shock, for Jonathan's wife
Was accustomed to nothing but marital strife.
With a puzzled expression and half-wary eye,
She jumped in the seat to give it a try.

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"It's got plenty of soup," he said with a smile,
"Just give it the gas in your usual style."
His wife turned around with a scowl fierce to view.
"If you're hoping I'll wreck it, the joke is on you.

"You seem to forget your dear little wife
Has been driving a car for most of her life.
I may travel fast, but always with care;
Don't get the idea I'll be out of your hair!"

"Why, sweetie, you wrong me," her husband replied,
"My life would be empty if ever you died."
"Hah!" said his wife, "Am *I* being conned!
Inside of a week you'd be keeping a blonde."

As Jonathan carefully swallowed a grin,
The bane of his life took off for a spin.
She tore up the hill in her Finnytail-8,
And there, at its crest, discovered her fate.

His plan had succeeded. That automobile
Shot into space with his wife at the wheel.
He'd measured the tail-fins down to a hair,
And figured the incline with infinite care;
For Jonathan Jones' ingenious bait
Used aerodynamics to murder his mate.

Now Jonathan sits with his blonde every night;
She likes the moon, but to him the real sight
Is that shiny, luxurious Finnytail-8
Orbiting Mars at a furious rate.

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Lean back and relax and enjoy yourself: you are about to read a detective short novel (Fergus O'Breen's First Murder Case) in the grand tradition of "The Golden Thirties"—when the detective story was "a thing of beauty" and "a joy forever" . . . Happy recapturing —and keep your private eye on

THE CLUE OF THE KNAVE OF DIAMONDS

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

THE TRIM LITTLE AIRLINE HOSTESS collected funny-looking passengers. That was why she liked Colonel Theodore Rand (U.S.A., retired). He was tall and well-set, with shoulders that looked padded and probably weren't. His hair was nearly white and he had a waxed mustache. Even while he gazed out of the window at empty middle-western plains, he managed to be commanding and a little pompous. In short, he looked so exactly like a drawing by Peter Arno that she amused herself by guessing whether he ever really went harrumph.

The Colonel frowned majestically and reached into his breast pocket. His long fingers drew out a folded piece of yellow paper. He reread its message carefully.

COME TO LOS ANGELES AT ONCE STOP YOU MAY BE INVALUABLE WITNESS AT INQUEST ON MY BODY STOP WATCH HECTOR CAREFULLY

HUMPHREY GARNETT

Colonel Rand had no idea how many times he had read that telegram since he had received it. He was a man of leisure living on a comfortable pension; there was no reason why he should not indulge his old friend's strange whim. But all his military experience had not prepared him for an urgent invitation to an inquest, signed by the expectant victim.

And who in heaven's name was Hector? The Colonel reread the message for the nth time and sat staring at it. Slowly and with great deliberation he went harrumph.

The little hostess smiled . . .

Humphrey Garnett, at that moment, did not in the least resemble a man awaiting the starring role at an inquest. His hunched body bent over a great board of one hundred and sixty squares, while his long hairy arms adjusted the chess pieces. There were red and green pieces in addition to the usual black and white—a full complement of each color. His stubby fingers placed the exquisitely carved men with surprising delicacy.

The dark young man with wavy hair picked up the green bishop and admired the intricate tracings of its mitre. "It will be sport to have a game of four-handed chess again," he said. His rich voice had that slight trace of British accent which is sometimes so impressive to Hollywood producers. In Richard Vinton's case it

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had served him very well indeed. "I haven't had a chance since the pater died," he added.

Garnett shook back his shaggy hair and looked up. "I had some fine games with Sir Edward. I hope you live up to the family tradition, Richard. You'll find Colonel Rand a worthy opponent."

Richard Vinton smiled. "A sort of double family tradition now, isn't it? I mean, it won't be many weeks before I'll be calling you father."

Garnett adjusted the white queen deliberately. "In chess," he said, "you can reckon your moves with certainty, provided you don't underestimate your adversary. But in other games—cards, for instance—chance plays a guiding part. Eh, Bill?"

The dry young man with the sparse sandy hair and the rimless spectacles looked up from a ponderous German work on chemistry. "What was that, Mr. Garnett?"

Garnett's stubby fingers massaged his firm chin. "I was merely developing a banal little parable, Bill, to the effect that Richard cannot be quite sure of marrying Kay until the marriage has taken place. What do you think?"

"I think it's certain enough," Bill Harding said in a flat hopeless voice, and went on reading.

Garnett, however, had hit his stride and was not to be stopped. He turned to the fourth man present. "What is your opinion, Arthur? Which is the true symbol of life—chess or cards?"

Arthur Willowe paused while he decided which red nine to move, knowing that whichever one he picked would be wrong. Things were like that. His futile white hands abandoned the game of patience and wavered in the air while he sought the proper words to answer his brother-in-law. "I can scarcely say, Humphrey," was the best he could bring forth. "As you know, I have never been able to master even simple chess, let alone this complex four-handed affair. No, I'm afraid I cannot judge your analogy."

Humphrey Garnett laughed loudly. There was something hairy even about his laughter. "That's one thing I'll say for you, Arthur—you're honest. You're not fit to do anything and you admit it. You can't earn a cent, you can't play a game, you can't say a sentence worth hearing. You can, of course, play solitaire; and I remember once thinking that you could drive a car."

There was something more than ordinarily vicious in Garnett's laughter this time. Arthur Willowe winced and drew into his shell of futility. He could still see that street corner. The shattered glass and the blood and the water pouring out of the broken hydrant to wash it all away—all but the memory. He could see Alicia lying there so still, looking as though she were practising some queer contortion act, like the shows they used to put on in the barn for two pins a head. He had lain there beside Alicia—his sister, Garnett's wife—thinking about the barn and wondering if he was dead too.

But of course he wasn't. He couldn't even die. He could do only one thing, and Garnett would despise him more than ever if he knew what that one thing was. Slowly he moved the wrong red nine.

Garnett was still talking. "You can make a pretty parable, for instance," he was saying to the dark young ac-

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tor, "out of pinochle. Do you know that game?"

Vinton shook his head gracefully. "Unfortunately, no. It always makes me think of elderly and paunchy film executives."

"There are marriages in the game," Garnett went on. "That is, the king and queen of a suit. And it seems moral and laudable that you should score points for something so proper as a marriage. But there's much more profit in another sort of mating. A 'pinochle' is a knave and a queen. You see?"

Vinton shrugged. I'm not sure."

"The knave," Garnett added emphatically, "of diamonds."

The room was silent. Bill Harding read on in a strange new scientific theory, Arthur Willowe lost another game of patience, and Humphrey Garnett put the finishing touches to the great chess table. Richard Vinton watched it all quietly.

Then the two girls came into the study. With their coming, Humphrey Garnett's oddly assorted household became complete. His daughter Kay was preeminently young—young, redheaded, and alive. She moved across the stuffy room with a lithe grace that seemed to belong more on the tennis court or on a high mountain path.

"Time for you all to get out," she said gaily. "I've got to see that Father keeps his hours." She moved over to Richard Vinton and took the young actor's hand in hers.

The other girl stood near the doorway holding the glass which was later to prove so important. Camilla Sallice was several years older and some inches taller than Kay. Beside the younger girl's brightness she seemed worn and almost sullen.

"I brought you your nightcap, Uncle Humphrey," she said. "I hope it's right—Scotch and plain water, no ice."

"You're a true Briton at heart, sir," Vinton observed.

Arthur Willowe suspended his game of solitaire and regarded the tall dark girl. Her presence in the house disturbed him. She was so entirely unaccounted for. She had become one of the household while Willowe lay in the hospital after that frightful accident. She called Garnett "Uncle Humphrey," yet Willowe knew that the man had no brothers or sisters. He was inclined to suspect that the courtesy title masked a relationship of quite another sort; and for his dead sister's sake he was jealous.

Garnett set the glass aside. "Very well, gentlemen. My daughter's word is law here. You may retire. I shall have my nightcap here in peace and then go to my rest. Are we ready for that experiment tomorrow, Bill? That is, unless Colonel Rand's arrival postpones it."

The young laboratory assistant was placing his rimless spectacles in their case. "Everything's set, Mr. Garnett. Good night, sir." He nodded to the company.

"Good night, Bill," Kay Garnett murmured. But he went out without answering her.

Garnett surveyed the chess table once more. "Thank Heaven Rand's coming!" he exclaimed, stretching his long arms. "For six months I've had two other men in this house who could play four-handed chess, and now at last I have a fourth. I'll take the green men," he went on dreamily. "They seem the most bizarre. You'll take the red, Richard—the color of youth and vigor. White will suit Bill

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—the pale efficient rabbit. That leaves the black pieces for Colonel Rand. He's always liked black."

"I wouldn't." Kay shuddered a little. "It's such an ominous color—mourning and death—"

"Omens don't bother me," Garnett laughed. "I've learned that Fate can be shaped if you're strong enough to do it. And I am. Now at long last I am to have a game of four-handed chess, and death is the only thing that can stop me."

Camilla Sallice's voice was low and throbbing. "Please, Uncle Humphrey. Don't joke like that."

"And what, my dear," he asked calmly, "makes you think that I'm joking?"

Colonel Rand took a taxi from the airport. The day was one of those brightly incredible samples of June in January which justify lyric writers and All-the-Year-Round Clubs. The old soldier leaned back on the leather seat in stiff contentment, with no serious inkling, despite the telegram, of what awaited him at the end of his journey.

Then, without any warning, a voice began shouting, "*You-oo-oo turn me inside out.*"

"I beg your pardon, sir!" the Colonel exclaimed.

"What's biting you, buddy?" the driver inquired in words largely drowned by the voice, which was going on "*upside down and around about.*"

"Someone," Colonel Rand observed heavily, "seems to be comparing me to a blasted whirligig."

"Oh, that." The driver seemed disappointed. "That's the radio."

The Colonel bristled. "My man, despite my years I am sufficiently aware of the wonders of modern science to realize that fact. But what can I do about it?"

"There's a knob in there," said the driver vaguely and turned his attention to a traffic problem.

Colonel Rand cast a trained glance over the interior of the cab and located the offending knob. The adenoidal voice was now comparing itself to a cast-off glove, which seemed to Rand an unwarrantable slur on worthy wearing apparel. He seized the knob and twisted.

It broke.

That was the beginning of the nightmare. In its way, it was a good thing. Without this maddening introduction, the grave news that Colonel Rand was soon to learn would have hurt much more deeply. As it was, the whole business fused into one wild fantasy.

The song, now blaring forth at the instrument's top volume, seemed to inspire the cab driver. He put fresh spirit into his work. He seemed possessed of a delusion that all corners were banked, like the curves on a speedway. Colonel Rand came as near as possible to losing his fine military carriage as he was jolted from one side to another, constantly reminded that he had turned an unknown young crooner upside down and inside out—which was, he thought, a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Even the narrow winding streets which led up into the bright Los Feliz hills did little to check the cab's progress. When the driver braked to a sudden stop before the Garnett home, he did so with a jerk that threw the long-

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suffering Colonel flat on the floor and at the same time, apparently, started Young Adenoids revealing that everything was hotcha for his hot chickadee.

The cab door opened, and Colonel Rand lifted his head, his white mustach gleaming against a purple face, to tell the driver just what he thought of him—a plan which would have delayed his entering the house by at least fifteen minutes. But instead of the driver the Colonel found himself glaring at what must have been the biggest policeman in all Los Angeles.

"And what do you think you're up to?" the officer demanded. While the Colonel puffed for breath, the policeman repeated the question, shouting to drown out that blasted crooner and adding a few words which occurred rarely even in Rand's vocabulary.

It is hard to be dignified when you are sprawled on the floor of a taxicab. Even the innate dignity of a retired army officer must suffer under those circumstances. "I have come to see Mr. Humphrey Garnett," the Colonel announced in sharp syllables, and drew himself up to his full height.

Colonel Rand's full height, however, was one factor which had never crossed the mind of the designer of Los Angeles cabs. The Colonel sat down with an abrupt force which left his posterior as grievously wounded as his dignity.

"Drunk at this hour," the policeman observed.

Rand's face grew a deeper purple and he began to splutter.

"And at your age, too," the officer added reproachfully.

"And my chickadee is hotcha for me," the crooner concluded.

Rand could never remember just how he got out of that cab. He recalled vague details of the process, which included knocking his forehead against the door, losing his hat, and pitching into the arms of the policeman; but the next clear moment came as he walked up the front steps of the house.

The nightmare, he thought, was passing, even though it was annoying that the officer, evidently still suspicious, was accompanying him into the house. It seemed to him rather a small house for a man of Garnett's wealth, but he remembered his friend's hatred of pretense and of what he called "putting on the dog."

"Say, buddy!"

He turned to see the cab driver. The nightmare wasn't over yet.

"That'll be two bucks and a half."

Rand counted out the exact change, pointedly omitting a tip.

The policeman looked at him pityingly. "So you'd even try to do a poor working man out of his money!" And he made the tutting noise that you can't spell.

Colonel Rand decided that it was time to take a firm stand. "Officer," he said, "I don't know what strange ideas you have formed concerning me, but I assure you that they are false. Any or all of them. I am a guest of Mr. Humphrey Garnett."

The officer squared himself. Rand was a large man, but he felt small beside this uniformed bulk. "And do you want to know what I think you are, with your taxicab and your radio and your mustach? I think you're a crank and I think you're drunk, and if you don't prove anything else, I'll be keeping you out of this door

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for the rest of this fine summer day."

The Colonel was past indignation. He assumed a dignified silence in its stead. Quietly he reached into his breast pocket, took out the telegram, and passed it over.

The simple act of reading those twenty-one words took a good foot off the officer's height. He looked at the Colonel with a mixture of respect, awe, and incredulity. "Follow me," he said abruptly, and led the way into the house.

It seemed exceedingly odd to Colonel Rand that the policeman did not ring, but just walked in. It was even odder that another policeman stood in the hallway near the door.

"Wait here," said Policeman Number One, and disappeared.

Colonel Rand opened his cigar case and took out a cigar. As he struck a match, Policeman Number Two became vocal. "Hold it, Pop," he said, and relapsed into silence.

Rand shook out the flame and stood as silent as his uniformed companion, chewing hard on the unlit cigar. In a few moments Number One reappeared.

"The Lieutenant says you should come right in," he announced. "This way."

There was still a nightmare quality to the proceedings, but it was no longer mad. Now there was a chill of earnest about it.

Colonel Rand followed Number One into a room which he recognized, even though he'd never seen it before. It must be Garnett's study. It was so exactly like the study of any house which Garnett had ever lived in. There was the strange miscellany of books, which seemed so random at first and later struck you as a complete outline of Garnett's character. There was the littered desk, of course, and the huge cabinet which housed Garnett's invaluable collection of playing cards. And there was the exquisitely inlaid table designed especially for four-handed chess.

Rand began to feel a cruel conviction that the game of four-handed chess would never take place.

He had examined the room at a glance. Now he looked at the two men in it. One, despite street clothes, he recognized at once as the Lieutenant of whom Number One had spoken, and obviously a Lieutenant of Detectives. He was young and rangy, but there was a professional directness and sharpness about him which stamped him unmistakably.

The other man was also young and also obvious. At first glance Rand decided against him. It was a type he didn't like. Too good-looking, too well-dressed, too easy. Quite possibly, the Colonel's sense of fairness forced him to admit, this was a very decent chap; but he was definitely something in the artistic line, and that wasn't a man's work.

The young Lieutenant looked up as Rand entered, then turned to the object of the Colonel's disaffection. "I'll want to speak to you again, Mr. Vinton. Will you please wait outside with the others?" He spoke courteously, but Rand felt that there was nothing soft about him for all that.

Vinton nodded. "At your service, Lieutenant. Anything I can do for Miss Garnett—you understand. I shall see you later." He smiled and turned to leave.

Rand had a better look at him now.

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Suddenly he realized that this was no mere dislike of a type. Vinton wasn't the name he'd used then; but it was the same man, and a rotter from the word go. He tried to suppress his reaction, but was not too successful.

Number One followed Vinton from the room. As soon as they were alone, the Lieutenant asked, "You know that man?"

"Yes, damn him," Rand admitted.

"We'll take that up in a minute. Will you sit down, sir? My name is Jackson—Lieutenant of Detectives. And yours?"

"Rand. Theodore. Colonel. U.S.A., retired."

"You came here at Humphrey Garnett's invitation?"

"Yes."

"This telegram—you received it when?"

"Three days ago."

"What did you do?"

"Left as soon as I could."

"Why?"

"Isn't that obvious? He's my friend. He needs me." Rand spoke with laconic sincerity.

"But although the message was such a strange one, you took no steps to check on it?"

"Why should I?"

"You came all the way across the country on what might easily have been a hoax?"

"To tell you the truth, sir, I did not care. I was sick to death of vegetating in a New York suburb, especially since my gardening efforts had taught me that nothing else was capable of vegetating there. That message promised something interesting. If nothing more comes than a visit with a friend, I shall be content."

"Hm." Jackson paused a minute, then seemed to accept, for the time being, the good faith of the Colonel's visit. "And who is this Hector?"

"Frankly, I haven't the slightest idea."

"And who is the young man who just left this room?"

The Colonel had by now recovered his dignity. "Young man," he said, "you have asked enough questions. Now I am going to ask two. First, may I smoke?" He lit his cigar without waiting for a reply and went on between puffs. "Second, what in heaven's name is all this about?"

There was a sympathetic gravity on the detective's face which answered the question wordlessly. Rand waved his cigar to brush aside futile phrases and sat smoking in silence for almost a minute. "So Garnett's dead," he said at last. "I can't say anything about that. It means a lot to me, but I can't talk what I feel. I wasn't made that way, and it's no use trying." There was another instant of silence, and then, with abrupt efficiency, the Colonel leaned forward, went harrumph, and asked, "Murder?"

"I think so."

"Of course, or you wouldn't be here. Is he—have they—?"

"He's at the morgue, sir."

"Rotten luck. He was a good man. Well, Lieutenant, I'm yours now. Tell me what you think fit and ask your questions."

"There's not much to tell you, Colonel Rand. It's a simple case, and I think your arrival may make it even simpler. I'll put it as briefly as I can. It's one of those times when circumstances are helpful and limit the investigation. You probably know that

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your friend didn't like house servants. He had a cook who came in by the day and a pair of Filipinos who cleaned twice a week. So there was no one in the house last night but the family and guests. The doors were all bolted on the inside this morning, and there's no reason to suspect any elaborate locked-room trickery.

"So that narrows it down to the five people in the house—Garnett's daughter Kay, his brother-in-law Arthur Willowe, his assistant Harding, and the two guests, Vinton and a Miss Sallice. Just what the Sallice girl's status in the family might be, I haven't been able to learn. Vinton is Kay Garnett's fiancé. He often stays here—there's a room set aside for him."

Colonel Rand started. Jackson observed him a moment, then continued. "Mr. Garnett stayed on in his study after the others retired. They all went their separate ways, and any one of them might have come back to him, for all they can prove to the contrary. Before they left, this Sallice girl had brought him a nightcap of whiskey and water, which he set aside to drink later. He drank only half of it. That was enough."

"Poisoned?"

"Yes. Hydrocyanic acid. Death almost instantaneous. But he did manage to leave us a clue—the first time in my experience that I've come across that sort of thing. And I'm not sure yet what it means. Apparently, he deliberately crumpled one playing card."

Rand leaned forward. "If my guess is right, sir, my arrival may indeed make the case simpler. Was it a knave of diamonds?"

Jackson looked up sharply. "It was."

"And how do you interpret that?"

"As I say, I don't know. In fortune-telling, if I remember rightly, it denotes a blond young man; and I recall a mystery novel where it meant a pun on somebody's name in French."

"Hang your mystery novels, Lieutenant. Let me assure you that this knave of diamonds means a *dark* young man, and a dark-hearted knave he is."

"Go on, Colonel," Jackson urged.

"Five years ago, sir, I was on a Cunarder returning home from a visit in England. I am a land man, and ocean travel has always seemed to me only a regrettable necessity. My one objection, despite all the mewlings of the pacifists, to the World War—my last active service—was that we had to cross an ocean to fight it. So instead of viewing the supposed beauties of the sea, I spent my time in the smoking room playing cards.

"There was a sound crowd of men on that voyage, mostly Britishers. I'd met a good few of them around the London clubs. And there was a young chap named Lawrence Massey. Nobody seemed to know anything about him; but several of them had met him before, so we all accepted him.

"I think it was he who suggested we try pinochle. I'm not sure. We'd never tried it before—fact is, I never really thought it was a gentleman's game—but we were tired of poker and bridge, and pinochle proved interesting and challenging once we got into it. Massey won a good deal. At first we thought it was simply because he knew the game better, the really fine points, and we admired him for a deft player. Then old Vantage—Sir Herbert, you know, the War Office man—noticed that it was generally a double

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pinochle that Massey won on. Those two queens of spades and two jacks of diamonds seemed to fall inevitably into his hand.

"Well, sir, I'll make a short story of it. It was a rotter's trick, and I'm frank to say I never quite caught the hang of it. There was sleight of hand involved, that I know. Of course none of us spoke to him after that. But he'd made a fair killing already, and it didn't seem to worry him. But just snubbing him didn't seem to satisfy old Vantage. He's got a vicious sense of practical humor, and he had to carry on with it.

"It started by merely dropping references to a knave of diamonds whenever Massey was within earshot. Then Vantage slipped down to Massey's stateroom and stuck a knave of diamonds on the door. Next the old man bribed the bartender. He pasted a knave of diamonds on a glass, and every time Massey ordered a drink he got that glass.

"But the man took it well, I'll say that for him. He was a rotter, but he had guts. And he had his revenge on old Vantage the night of the masquerade ball. Vantage had got together a score of used decks and sorted out all the diamond knaves. He'd sewn them into a kind of necklace, and his idea was to pop that over Massey's costume as soon as he appeared, so that everyone would think it was part of his get-up and ask him about it. But hanged if the young rascal didn't show up at the masquerade costumed as the knave of diamonds himself. I'm cursed if I didn't like him for it."

Jackson spoke up as the Colonel paused. "I take it that this Lawrence Massey is Richard Vinton?"

"It is, sir—the same man."

"Did Mr. Garnett know?"

"I can't tell you. He knew the Massey story—he must have heard me tell it a dozen times. But I've no idea he identified Vinton. I never saw him myself from that time till today. I didn't even know that little Kay was engaged."

Lieutenant Jackson rose. "I think that will be all for the moment, Colonel. Needless to say, we'll have more to talk about later. By the way, when did you arrive in Los Angeles?"

"By the plane which reached the airport about an hour ago." Rand smiled at the thought that his harmless movements would now be subjected to an official check.

"Thank you, Colonel. Now I suppose you'll naturally want to see the family. Ask the man at the door—he'll show you where they all are. And thank you, sir, for your information."

Colonel Rand left the study in a worried frame of mind. Had he said too much? A young man with such spirit might well have changed for the better in five years. And if little Kay loved him . . .

He shrugged, went harrumph, and was about to push open a door and enter a room when a shrill voice from within made him pause.

"I tell you I'm afraid," the voice was crying. "I know you all think I'm not good for anything. He thought so too. And he was right. But that doesn't make me any the less afraid to die."

Rand recognized the voice—poor futile old Willowe. The in-law hanger-on. But he was generally so quiet and unobtrusive—what could have brought him to this display of fear?

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Gently the Colonel pushed the door.

The attention of those in the room was so fixed on Arthur Willowe that Rand's entrance went unnoticed. The vague little man sat in a large bright armchair which would ordinarily have effaced him completely. Now the terror on his face and in his voice made him for the moment the most vivid object in the room.

"It was all right when he was alive," Willowe went on. "I knew he couldn't do anything then because of all of you. But now he's dead and there's nothing to stop him. We'll all be dead together—Humphrey and Alicia and me. We'll have love and hate and death all for ourselves."

Kay Garnett leaned over him quietly. She had been crying, and her voice was still shaken. "Please, Uncle Arthur. Don't excite yourself so. It's time for your nap. You'd better rest."

"No! No! I don't want to rest. I might sleep, you see, and that would make it ever so much easier for *him*."

"I say, old man." It was that plucky rotter, Massey or Vinton or whatever he called himself. "Don't take on so. We've got to carry on, you know." He had changed; there was a strength and sincerity in Vinton which Rand had never observed in Massey.

The other young man in the room (a stranger to Rand—it must be the assistant, Harding, whom the Lieutenant had mentioned) thumbed a heavy book and tried to keep his eyes from the painful scene. Poor Willowe babbled on. Then the dark girl (that would be the mysterious Miss Sallice) crossed softly to the old man's chair.

"Please," she said gently. Her voice was husky and rich. "Please. Alicia wouldn't like you this way."

Arthur Willowe paused. "No. Of course. I'm sorry." He sounded like a little boy who had been scolded. Then he looked up in bewilderment. "What do you know about Alicia? And what do we know about you? Who are you anyway?"

Before the girl could answer, Kay had seen Colonel Rand. Swiftly she ran across the room and threw herself into his arms. "Uncle Teddy! Oh, how good! How good!"

She cried a little and kissed him and laughed because the waxed mustach tickled her and cried again. The old soldier held her close and was very happy.

Little Kay had grown up in just the way he had hoped. She was fresh and lovely. She was her mother Alicia with a simple easiness which hadn't been quite proper for young ladies when he and Alicia were—well, friends. It hadn't got further than that when she met Humphrey Garnett.

He stroked Kay's bright red hair and kissed the top of her head clumsily. She looked up, half smiled, and tossed her head as though to shake away the tears. Awkwardly he pulled the neat white handkerchief out of his breast pocket and wiped her blue-green eyes. Then—he was so used to being a great-uncle to the neighbors' children—he held it to her nose.

She laughed nervously. "I'm a big girl now, Uncle Teddy. I worry about powdering my nose, not blowing it." Rand frowned; this forced gaiety was sadder than tears. "But I don't even worry about powder now," she went on. "I'm so glad you came. I need you."

She turned to face the room. "You'd

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better join the family group. We're waiting to hear what that nice young Lieutenant makes up his mind to do about . . ." —her voice quavered a little—"about all this. He's been asking us questions all morning—we haven't even had time to think. It doesn't seem real yet . . ." She broke off and took up the role of hostess. "You know Uncle Arthur, of course."

"Right. How are you, Willowe." The Colonel seized the weak hand sturdily. Pity Alicia's brother should have turned out so much what the young men would call a washout. Still he was a likable sort of chap. Odd, that fit of hysteria just now.

"This is Miss Sallice—Colonel Rand. Camilla was a protégé of Father's."

Was he imagining things, or did Kay's voice take on a trace of unkindness quite foreign to her nature? Rand bowed formally to the young lady. Decidedly attractive, he observed, though the contrast to Kay made her seem somewhat full-blown and artificial. A subtle trace of exotic scent heightened the effect. He found himself looking at her again. Yes, for all the deft make-up, hers was a face of tragedy.

"And this is Bill Harding, Father's lab assistant." The quiet young man set aside his weighty volume and rose politely. It was a good handshake—firm, without exaggeration. Rand decided that the man himself was like that.

"And this is my fiancé, Richard Vinton. You've certainly heard me talk about Uncle Teddy." Vinton gave no sign of recognition, and Rand followed his lead. He even took the fellow's hand, with a warmth assumed for Kay's sake.

The introductions over, there seemed nothing more to say. Obviously no one wanted to mention the one important topic, and no one could think of anything else worth mentioning at such a time. Despite Kay's almost hysterical efforts, this was no time for small-talk.

Rand, seated uncomfortably in a corner, suddenly recalled that the Lieutenant had kept his telegram, and decided to busy himself seeing if he could recall it from memory. One phrase worried him. WATCH HECTOR CAREFULLY. He looked about the silent room. Arthur Willowe, Bill Harding, Richard Vinton (or Lawrence Massey)—which one?

The silence grew. Willowe had picked up a deck of cards and was noiselessly dealing them onto the small table near him. Harding had returned to his ponderous book. Vinton was holding Kay's hand. The Sallice girl was humming something indistinguishable. The sun streamed into the room with oblivious cheerfulness.

Rand realized that his cigar had gone out, and his palate could never endure relighting a dead one. With a gesture of annoyance he tossed the cigar at a large brass ash-stand. His aim was too good. There was a crashing clatter, and stand and ashes were scattered on the floor.

Everyone started. It was as though someone had belched in the middle of the Armistice Day silence. Rand swore. Everything that happened to him was turning tragedy into farce. Then he saw that this was his opportunity. Everyone was offguard, their nerves on edge. He rose and bellowed, "All right then. Out with it. *Who is Hector?*"

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Nothing happened. Nothing at all. There was no sign of any reaction but sheer bewilderment. If anyone there had suspicious knowledge, he was a genius at covering it up. Kay stared at him as though he had suddenly gone mad.

"Uncle Teddy!" she cried reproachfully.

Before he could explain himself, the door opened. There were the Lieutenant and Numbers One and Two. Jackson strode across the room to Vinton—a dramatic movement somewhat hampered by his tripping over the ash-stand. But he recovered himself nimbly and said, "I'm afraid we'll have to take you along with us, Vinton."

Kay let out a little cry. She pressed a pale hand to her mouth and stood trembling. Arthur Willowe looked up from his solitaire long enough to say, "It's no use," and went on playing.

Rand advanced to the Lieutenant. After all, the fellow was Kay's fiancé. "Look here," he said. "Just because I told you—"

"May I ask, sir, what that was?" Vinton queried.

"It isn't just that, Colonel," Jackson interposed. "You see, there were only his fingerprints on the glass. And there's even more to it than that."

Vinton shrugged. "I appreciate your position, Lieutenant," he said with easy confidence. "Under the apparent circumstances, there's very little use in my assuring you that you're wrong. But you are, of course, and you'll find that out if you continue the investigation. Meanwhile, I might as well go along with you."

Rand looked at the man with open admiration. It was the same fine bravado which he had displayed at the masquerade party—when, Rand reminded himself, he had been guilty beyond any possible doubt. But there was some good in the fellow—courage, at least. He hoped sincerely that the chap was innocent this time.

Some hours later, after an excellent lunch had been swallowed untasted by a silent assembly, Colonel Rand sat on the sun porch with Kay. He found comfort in the bright verdure of the hills which rolled before them. "From whence cometh help . . ." he murmured.

"He can't be guilty," Kay was insisting. "No matter if they find his fingerprints everywhere in the room. I knew about that knave of diamonds business. He told me two days ago, and I didn't care. It isn't what he used to be that matters. He's doing well as an actor now and he's honest and clean. Of course, I don't know what Father would have thought, but anyway he didn't know and so that proves he couldn't have meant Richard with that card, doesn't it?"

Rand essayed a comforting smile and patted her cold hand. "Of course, Kay. Of course."

"Kay!" It was Camilla Sallice, standing in the doorway. "There's a man here who wants to see you. He says Richard sent him."

Kay straightened up. "Oh. Thanks, Camilla. Please ask him to come out here—I feel better here than in the house."

In a moment a small, sleek man came onto the porch. He was dressed with quiet smartness and carried with him an air of quiet efficiency. "Miss Garnett?" he asked.

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"Yes."

"My name is Farrington—Max Farrington. You've probably heard Mr. Vinton speak of me. I'm his lawyer."

"Oh. I should have thought, but with Father . . . It all happened so suddenly. I've been wondering if I could do anything for Richard, and I just can't think straight."

"Mr. Vinton phoned me from the police station. I talked with him there, and he asked me to see you. If I could speak with you privately—"

"I'm sorry. Colonel Rand, Mr. Farrington. Colonel Rand was my father's closest friend. I think I'd like to have him here while we talk."

Rand beamed. It was good to feel that the girl wanted him. He extended his cigar case to the lawyer.

"Sorry. I never smoke. Waste of valuable energy. But I'm glad to have you with us, Colonel. You know the situation?"

Rand nodded. He couldn't make up his mind about this suavely alert attorney, and he wasn't going to commit himself verbally till he was sure.

"Very well." Farrington seated himself. "The police seem certain they have the right man. We, I take it, are equally certain that they have not. Now if the case comes to trial, I'll have him make a straight plea of not guilty, of course—I won't compromise his reputation with any fake business of 'not guilty by reason of insanity' or any such tommyrot. And I'll probably get an acquittal. But meanwhile the newspapers will have done their work. A featured actor, on the way to stardom, arrested for murder—it's too good a story. They're bound to play it up for all it's worth. And so—well, we need more than an acquittal."

"You mean, sir, that you—we, that is—need to prove beyond any doubt not only that Vinton is innocent, but that someone else is guilty?"

"Exactly. I see, Colonel, that you too have the direct approach. We need to prove that someone else is guilty. Now the police seem to be perfectly satisfied that their case is finished. They won't investigate much further. And work like that isn't in my line—I'll defend him if he ever comes to trial, but I'd rather that never happened. What we need is a detective, and the man I always send such work to happens to be laid up in the hospital. So Vinton suggested that you and I—and you too, of course, Colonel—might confer and select some private investigator who'd take on the case. I know most of them by reputation and can recommend—"

"Fergus!" Kay exclaimed.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Garnett?"

"Fergus O'Breen."

"Excuse me, but is this Fergus O'Breen a detective?"

"Of course. He's got a license and an office and everything. He's a crazy Irishman, but smart as they make them. I went to school with his sister," she added, as though that explained everything.

"I don't know—" Farrington began.

Colonel Rand interrupted him. "There's something to Kay's idea, Farrington. A young man at the beginning of his career might be far more valuable in breaking down preconceived notions than an older and more experienced man. We can at least interview the fellow and get an impression of him."

"Of course it's as Miss Garnett wishes. For myself, I'd prefer—"

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"Then it's settled." Kay rose. "I'll call Fergus now. Come along Uncle Teddy. You can listen in on the extension and hear what he sounds like."

Rand felt embarrassingly like an eavesdropper as he stood with the extension to his ear. He heard Kay dial the number and then a shrill voice saying, "O'Breen Detective Agency."

"May I speak to Mr. O'Breen please."

"Just a moment. I'll see if he's in."

A pause, then a heavier voice which sounded suspiciously like the first one in a different register. "This is The O'Breen speaking."

"Fergus?"

"Kay sweetheart! And how are you this balmy afternoon?"

"Fergus," she faltered, "I want you to come over here right away. It's terribly important."

"By the smiling good fortune of my own little gods, my sweeting, I'm free. For has it not echoed in the halls of Tara that an O'Breen heeds ever the behest of a fair woman? Especially a redhead."

"Don't joke, Fergus. Just come right now."

"I'm not joking. I give you warning: When I do joke I talk like a stage Irishman. So shure and begorra, it's dead serious I am, darling."

Rand heard Kay laugh nervously. "But will you come?"

"Will I? Through hell and high water on seven-league boots."

Colonel Rand had never before seen a detective in a tight-fitting yellow polo shirt. It was really not a good idea. It made the young man's lean face seem even leaner and clashed violently with his crimson hair. But then, the Colonel reflected, this was Southern California.

Rand had answered the doorbell, to see this red-and-yellow apparition leaning against the jamb and hear him announce, "The O'Breen to see Miss Garnett." There had followed a brief conference on his qualifications. They seemed auspicious enough. He had been in the private inquiry business for six months. He admitted frankly that this was his first murder case, but he gave impressive references for the solution of several robberies and one case of arson. Rand was especially pleased with the account of how he had trapped a peculiarly obnoxious blackmailer by extra-legal means.

Farrington seemed satisfied—a trifle more readily, in fact, than Rand had anticipated. "Of course," the lawyer said, "I don't need to express how much I wish you luck, Mr. O'Breen. It isn't just your luck—it's mine and my client's and this young lady's as well. I feel I can now safely leave the case in your hands—I have the bail and other matters to see to." And with brisk politeness he took his leave.

Fergus uncoiled himself from his chair and began to pace the room softly but rapidly. "Now look, Kay," he began. "There isn't any use in my saying how sorry I am this happened. I know how it's hit you, and I know it's going to hit you a lot worse later, when you have time to think about it. But we've got to be impersonal about the whole thing—and that's asking a lot of an Irishman. I've got to forget you used to spend week-ends with my sister. I've got to forget the time you

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taught me to waltz and the time I gave you your first roller-coaster ride. In short, I've got to be serious and unsentimental—and so do you."

Kay managed a small smile. "All right, Fergus. I'll try."

"I know you will, darling." He stopped sharply. "Look at me for a fine fatted fool. I start out being impersonal by calling my client 'darling.' Even calling you Kay is dangerous. I'll stick to Miss Garnett. And by the way, if my pacing bothers you, just tell me to quit."

"It's all right."

"Good. You see, there's two reasons for it. It helps me think, and then sometimes it gets people so nervous they say things they don't mean to. Now for the questions. I suppose you've had more than enough of 'em today already, but I've got to get all of it straight."

"Go ahead—Mr. O'Breen."

"Thank you—Miss Garnett. Now tell me first of all about your father—what kind of a guy—I mean—well, tell me all about him."

"I think Colonel Rand could do that better than I could. You see, to me he was just my Father. I mean, he was sweet and good and—well, I always thought he was marvelous."

Fergus whirled to Colonel Rand. "And was he?"

"Was he what?"

"Was he marvelous?"

Rand went harrumph. "Hang it, young fellow, you ought to know that a man doesn't think that way about another man. I liked Garnett. I liked him better than anyone else I've ever known. That's all I can say."

"When did you first meet him?"

"I don't know exactly—it seems as though you've always known the people who are really close to you. Some time around 1910, I'd say. I met him through this young lady's mother—Alicia Willowe then. We struck up a firm friendship and then we quarreled. I didn't see him again until just before the war—our work threw us together then. By that time he was married to Alicia and Kay was born. I was an unofficial member of the family until Garnett moved out here eight years ago. Since then I've seen him once or twice a year on his trips east."

"Just a minute, Colonel," Fergus interrupted with a gesture something like a radio announcer shushing studio applause. "There's a lot in that brief statement of yours. Now some questions. Why did you quarrel?"

"I fail to see, sir, that that is any concern of yours."

Fergus shrugged. "That's the curse of being unofficial. If I were a policeman, now, I could browbeat you—if I had the slightest idea how to browbeat. It just isn't in my character. Sweetness and light, that's what I am. All right, Colonel, it's no concern of mine. I won't mention it again. Now, after you had quarreled over Alicia Willowe—"

Rand thumped the arm of his chair vigorously. "Blast you, sir, do you mean to—"

Fergus waved him to silence again. "We can't discuss that, can we, sir? I promised never to mention it again."

Rand subsided. For all the yellow polo shirt, he admitted grudgingly, the young man had a certain shrewdness. "Go on," he grunted.

"You say your work threw you together. What work was that?"

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"I was attached to the General Staff. Garnett was doing research work in chemical warfare. We were both stationed in Washington."

"I see. When did Garnett retire from government service?"

"Immediately after the war. We very nearly had another quarrel then. He had suddenly become filled with weakling humanitarianism. He felt that the work he had done was wrong, and that he should devote himself only to the causes of peace. He spent ten years as a highly paid research technician for several large chemical companies and then retired. I may add that he found the services of peace much more profitable."

"Uncle Teddy!"

"I am not criticizing your father, my dear. I am simply doubting his humanitarian motives. Possibly I flatter him."

"These regular trips east—what brought them about?"

"I don't know, exactly. He was carrying on private researches—he had to keep his mind busy. These trips were probably connected with whatever he was doing on his own, but he never told me what that was."

"As intimate as you two were, he never told you?"

"Mr. O'Breen, when men are young, they share all their ambitions. They tell each other their newest hopes and ideas and perhaps work them out together. Garnett and I were like that once. But old men's friendships are different. They smoke together, drink together, play cards and chess and golf together—but all they *tell* each other are the newest versions of the oldest smoking-room stories. They respect each other's privacy. It's more comfortable; more dignified."

Fergus scratched his head and paced some more. "I never thought of it like that. You're right about young men. We talk about everything. But maybe you should keep your deepest self for yourself. It makes sense. But at least you can tell me what kind of man Garnett was?"

"He had, sir, the most typically masculine mind I have ever known. It was hard and intricate, strong and subtle at once. He could take equal pleasure in climbing a mountain, solving an equation, catching a fish, inventing a new end-game, or—if you will forgive me, Kay—making love to a beautiful woman. And he did them all exceedingly well."

"What was his temper like?"

"Vigorous. Whether good or bad, it was vigorous. He liked people and he hated them. I have never known him simply to tolerate a person—unless perhaps it was Arthur Willowe. Whatever he did, he wanted to do strongly. He never had whims. He went always in a straight and inflexible line."

"Would you call him tolerant?"

"No," said Rand.

"I begin to see him," Fergus said. "I'm sorry I never met him, even though I suppose he might have decided to kick me out of the house. Maureen gave me pretty much the same idea from the times she visited you, Kay."

"I thought, Mr. O'Breen, that you'd decided on Miss Garnett?"

"Look. That's too much trouble. Suppose I just call you Client. That's easy, and still it's formal."

"Very well, Detective."

"All right. Now for the facts in the case. We'll take them chronologically.

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Did anything happen before yesterday that would give us a sort of point of departure?"

"The telegram," Rand suggested, and went on to explain.

Fergus stopped pacing for a moment. "And the Lieutenant kept it. Well, I don't blame him. Do you know if he checked the sending of it?"

"I asked him before he took Vinton away. He'd checked it by phone. It was sent from this telephone and charged to the phone bill. Beyond that, there wasn't any possible way of identifying the sender."

"Can you remember the exact words of the message?"

"Yes. Needless to say, it puzzled me, and I read it a great many times. It went:

COME TO LOS ANGELES AT ONCE STOP YOU MAY BE INVALUABLE WITNESS AT INQUEST ON MY BODY STOP WATCH HECTOR CAREFULLY.

And it was signed HUMPHREY GARNETT."

"Hmm. Do those sound like Mr. Garnett's words to you?"

"It's hard to say. Everyone's style sounds the same in a telegram. But I'd say it was probably from him. It's direct and vigorous and a little cryptic."

"So that's why you asked that funny question," Kay put in.

"What funny question, Client?"

"All of a sudden Uncle Teddy shouted, 'Who is Hector?' I didn't know what to think."

"Very well. And who in the name of the sons of Uisneach *is* Hector?"

"I haven't any idea."

"And you, sir?"

Rand shook his head. "It means nothing to me."

"At any rate, whoever Hector may be, this telegram seems to mean that Mr. Garnett expected an attempt on his life. Were you coming out here soon anyway, Colonel Rand?"

"Yes. My life was growing regrettably dull, and I'd told Garnett I'd be out in a month or so. That's why this urgency surprised me all the more."

"'YOU MAY BE INVALUABLE WITNESS,'" Fergus repeated. "How could you, if you didn't get here till *after* the crime? Or did he expect that it wouldn't happen until after your arrival?"

"I was able to explain the knave of diamonds," Rand suggested. At an indication from Fergus the Colonel retold the story of the Cunarder, old Vantage, and Lawrence Massey.

"Yes," Fergus admitted. "You were invaluable there. But after all, our purpose, if possible, is to save Vinton, not to tighten the noose around him. In what other way could you prove invaluable?"

"None that I know of so far."

"All right, then—let's get on with our reconstruction. Three days before the crime that telegram is sent. This is Monday. That would be last Friday. Now, Client, when did you learn the secrets of your fiancé's past?"

Kay hesitated. "That was Friday too. Richard took me to the preview of his latest picture. Afterwards we drove up in the hills and parked. It was a lovely night . . . Suddenly he said, 'My dear, I can't go on like this any longer. If you're going to marry me, you must know all about me.' And he told me that Vinton wasn't his real name and that he used to be a cardsharper who traveled on ocean liners. He tried to tell me details, but

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I didn't want to hear any more. I've known him almost a year, and I know he's as fine a man as any girl could want. To know that he'd changed so much and made himself what he is—well, it just made me love him all the more."

She said it very simply. Rand watched her closely; yes, she did love him—there was no doubt of that. And he resolved from that moment to do everything he could to help her and this strange young Irishman in their efforts to outwit the police.

"Did your father show any signs of displeasure with Vinton?"

"No. They got on well. You see, Richard's a very good chess player and he's interested in puzzles and cards the way Father is—was. They were quite congenial."

"Good. Now as to the crime itself —"

Rand had heard, on all sides, so many references to the crime that he was by now somewhat confused. At last he heard a straight account of as much as was known.

It boiled down to this: Garnett always ate breakfast regularly at seven, in order that he might have a long morning for his somewhat mysterious laboratory researches. The cook-by-the-day didn't arrive until nine, so Kay prepared the early breakfast for her father and his assistant, while the others ate later at their pleasure. This morning she had risen at six thirty and set to work. Harding was in the kitchen at seven, and she served him, wondering what on earth could be keeping her punctual father. At about a quarter after seven she went up to Garnett's room. The bed hadn't been slept in.

She wasn't especially worried then. Once or twice before he had stayed up late in his study and fallen asleep there. Once, she remembered, it was when he had tried to invent a five-deck solitaire, and she'd found him sound asleep with cards piled over every inch of floor space and the solitaire still uninvented. It was one of the few mental defeats of his life. So this time she went at once to look in the study.

Humphrey Garnett was there. The lights were still burning, and he was lying face down in the middle of the floor. A few inches from his outstretched right hand lay a crumpled playing card. His hands had black gloves on them.

Fergus interrupted her at this point. "Why on earth should a man wear gloves to be murdered in? The black's a fetching idea for anticipated mourning, but still—"

"Oh, there's nothing surprising about that. When he stayed up alone like that, he often used to go over his collection of playing cards. Some of them are very rare and have to be handled carefully to keep them in condition. He planned to leave them to a museum. So he wore gloves whenever he touched them."

"Was he wearing the gloves when you said good night to him?"

Kay thought back. "No—I think I could swear that he wasn't. Because he played with my hair when he kissed me good night, and I know I'd have noticed it."

"Then look, Client. This business about fingerprints. Did the Lieutenant say definitely that he'd found *only* your fiancé's fingerprints on the glass?"

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Again she pondered. "I think so."

Rand nodded. "Yes. He stated that quite clearly."

Fergus paced more eagerly. "But if your father was ungloved when you left him, then he must have taken the glass in his fingers. Besides, there'd be Miss Sallice's prints if she brought it to him."

Kay looked up with pleased surprise. "Why, yes. That's true. Then you mean—"

"I knew there was something funny as soon as I heard about those fingerprints. Nowadays, when prints are talked about and written about so much, a man would have to be a fool to leave them so obviously."

"You think . . .?"

"We'll just file that away for future references. Go on, Client."

Naturally, Kay had been frightened. She knew her father had something the matter with his heart and she felt dreadfully and unreasoningly sure that he was dead. She went over and touched him. He was cold. Then she saw that his face was twisted and she smelled the scent of bitter almonds —and she knew what had happened.

She fainted then. She must have cried out first, although she couldn't remember it, because Bill Harding came hurrying to her. He revived her, and reminded her that their first duty was to call the police. Harding had a highly developed sense of orderly routine. While they waited, she roused the rest of the household and gave them black coffee. It gave her something to do and kept her from having time to think.

"And how," Fergus asked, "did they react when you told them the news?"

"Let me see. I was too numb myself to notice much. Camilla seemed more hurt than any of the others Uncle Arthur was frightened rather than anything else—I don't know why. Richard was so good—he seemed to give me strength."

"Go on, Client."

There wasn't much more to tell. The police came and the men from the coroner's office and cameramen and fingerprint experts and reporters —it was all a confused nightmare to Kay.

Fergus had sprawled over a chair while she talked. Now he began to pace again. "I can see that they've got a good case against your Richard. I imagine they make out the motive something like this: he knew that Colonel Rand was coming out here soon and that his past would be disclosed when the Colonel saw him. If your father knew what he had been, he'd forbid the marriage, or if he couldn't stop it, disinherit you. So he had to be disposed of. Don't look at me like that, Client. I'm just saying what Jackson must be thinking. It makes a pretty good case. But if it's true, how did your father know Vinton's intentions three days in advance? Why aren't there more fingerprints on that glass? And who is Hector? When we've answered those three questions, we'll be well on our way to bringing your Richard back to you.

"Now one more question before I begin to investigate. What do you know about your father's will? Aside from the museum that gets the card collection. I doubt if we've got a curator for a suspect."

"Not a thing, Detective. Father never talked about his business af-

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fairs with me. You'll have to ask Uncle Arthur—he might know. Or possibly Bill."

"Right. Now keep your chin up, Client, and your eyes as bright as your hair. The O'Breen is about to solve his first murder case. And if you don't mind, Colonel, I'd like you to come along with me. I don't want to wear Kay out, and you sort of lend authority. Besides, I might want a witness to what people say."

Colonel Rand accompanied him gladly. He was beginning to decide that the young fellow had some talent, and he wanted to watch him at work.

They found Bill Harding in the laboratory built onto the rear of the house. Apparently he felt it his duty to continue his dead employer's researches, or else the pure labor involved was a form of release from the nervous tension of the household.

"Mr. Harding," Rand began, "we are sorry to interrupt you at your work. But this is Mr. O'Breen, who is investigating Garnett's death at Kay's request. I'm sure you will help us to clear Mr. Vinton's name."

That was a polite way of putting it, the Colonel thought. He realized that the circumstances were such that the clearing of Vinton would almost inevitably involve the accusation of Harding, Willowe, or Miss Sallice; but he hoped that they might be too concerned to recognize that fact. All of them, of course, save the murderer.

Harding smiled wryly. "I'm sure I'm only too willing to clear Vinton's good name, if that is Kay's wish. I'd ask you to sit down, but this laboratory wasn't constructed for social chats."

Rand looked around the room. The mass of chemical apparatus meant nothing to him—an alchemist's paraphernalia could have conveyed no less. His attention came back to the young detective's questions.

They first covered the ground of the body's discovery. There was nothing new here—Harding's story agreed with Kay's. Then Fergus went on, "Look. These researches here—this laboratory—could you tell us just what it's all about?"

"Gladly. That is, as far as I can. Ever since I came to live with Mr. Garnett, three years ago, we have been working on an alexipharmical gas."

Fergus gestured a halt. "Wait a minute. Remember we aren't scientists. You've been working on what kind of gas?"

"Alexipharmical. Antidotal, to put it more simply. Mr. Garnett's idea was to double the protection of the civilian population against gas raids. Not only would everyone be equipped with gas masks, but at central strategic points there would be installed concentrated bombs of our gas. They might even be employed in private homes. When an attack occurred, these bombs could be exploded, and our gas would counteract the effects of the poison gas."

There was eagerness in Harding's face—he took on a personality, a character that was ordinarily lacking in him. "It's a truly fine idea," he went on. "It is so rare to see a great scientific mind—and Mr. Garnett was that—devoting itself to the cause of peace. But it was a difficult task. We still haven't solved it completely. There are so many possibilities in the attack,

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and you have to take them all into account."

"It's a waste of time," Rand snorted. "War against civilians is absurd. Every decent military strategist knows what a campaign of terrorism means. No real advantage gained over the enemy, and disaffection within your own ranks."

"I know that, sir," Harding said respectfully. "That's perfectly true on paper, and it may even work out that way. But still it is done, wicked though it may be. Look at Spain."

"Wickedness my left foot, young man! It's just rotten bad tactics."

"But there'll always be rotten bad tactics, sir, and we've got to be protected against them."

This bypath had apparently gone too far for Fergus. "How advanced were you in your researches?" he asked.

"You never quite know about things like that. We might have gone on for years; we might have had a lucky break today which would have solved everything. Personally, I think we could have licked the problem in about another six months."

"And do you think now that you can lick it by yourself?"

"I don't know," Harding said ruefully. "I hope so. It means a lot to me—oh, not just the name and glory, but the whole idea. I'll try like the devil to lick it. And maybe I will. Though it'll be hard without Mr. Garnett."

"You see what I mean, don't you?" Fergus persisted. "That if—I know this sounds Oppenheimish, but it has to be considered—if anybody—picturesquely wicked Foreign Powers or whatnot—wanted to put a stop to your researches, they wouldn't have stopped at killing Mr. Garnett? You can still carry on?"

"I'll do my best no matter—"

"Good. Now what did you mean by saying you'd tell us about the researches as far as you could? Was Mr. Garnett doing other work?"

"Yes. But I haven't any idea what. I know he used to work in here after I'd leave him. Sometimes he'd even tell me to take the day off while he worked alone. But I can't tell you one definite thing about it. Later, if you want, I could go through his papers with you—I could tell, where you couldn't, if there were any notes that had nothing to do with the gas."

"Thanks. I'll have you do that. Now can you tell me anything about the terms of Mr. Garnett's will?"

"Not exactly. I know that he made one three years ago, just after I came here, because I was one of the witnesses; but I never saw it. I do know, however, that he kept a carbon copy of it in his desk. I came across it one day while I was looking for some notes. I saw what it was and managed to restrain my curiosity; but I remember where he kept it."

Harding led them into the study and began to hunt about in the desk. Fergus paced the room. Abruptly he paused before a shelf on which several decks of cards were neatly stacked. Apparently they were not a part of the collection, but simply cards for use. They were well worn and looked modern in design.

He turned to Harding. "Just a minute before you find the will. You remember that jack of diamonds—why do serious students of cards always say knave?—that was found beside Mr. Garnett?"

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"Yes."

"Well, look. I suppose the police took it away with them, but do you know which deck it came out of?"

Harding looked at the decks. "I think it was that one." He pointed at one with a design of unusual crossed flags on the back.

"The Stars and Bars," Rand murmured with surprised interest.

Fergus examined the pack. It had not been shuffled, but was still arranged in suits. He laid aside the clubs, hearts, and spades, and took up the diamonds.

"Ace," he said. "My old man—the card-playing flahool Irishman that he was—always used to call that the Earl o' Cork. 'It's the worst ace and the poorest card in the pack,' he'd say, 'and the Earl o' Cork's the poorest nobleman in all Ireland.' Funny how some cards have names."

"I used to know a sailor," Rand put in, "who called the four of clubs 'the Devil's Bedposts.' I never knew why."

Fergus laughed. "You sounded just like a character out of Chekhov then, Colonel . . . King of diamonds. Queen of diamonds. Ten of diamonds. You're right, Mr. Harding—the jack's missing." He looked much more elated than you would have expected from such a simple discovery.

Once he had indicated the pack, Harding had returned to the desk. Now he came back to them with a sheet of paper. "Here you are."

"Just a minute. These cards—do you remember if they were stacked like that when you found Mr. Garnett?"

"I think so. I couldn't say for certain."

"What I mean—if a deck had been disarranged, scattered around, you'd have been bound to notice it?"

"Why, yes, I think so. I do remember noticing especially how orderly the whole room was." Harding seemed a bit puzzled by these questions.

Fergus' attention now returned to the will, while Rand read it over his shoulder. Its contents were simple. The card collection to a museum, bequests to several research institutions, his library and the equipment for four-handed chess to Colonel Rand, $10,000 to Arthur Willowe, and a few minor bequests. Kay Garnett, of course, was the residuary legatee, which meant, Rand knew, a sizable fortune.

Harding looked crestfallen. "I had hoped," he said, "that he might have left me in a position to carry on our work. But it doesn't really matter so much. I think one of the Foundations might help me."

Fergus folded the paper and slipped it in his pocket. "We'll have to check with Mr. Garnett's lawyer to see if the original has any codicils, or even if there's been a later will. Meanwhile, I think our next step is Arthur Willowe."

They found Arthur Willowe in his upstairs room. As they approached the door, Rand could have sworn he heard the clicking of typewriter keys, but when they entered the room, there was no trace of a machine. The Colonel was puzzled. At a time like this, the most insignificant details can worry you. Had his normally acute hearing deceived him, or had there been another sound which he might have confused with that of a typewriter?

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It was a pleasant little room, neat as a woman's and bright with sun. While Fergus made his explanations, Rand strolled to the window and looked out at the fair Los Feliz hills, green even in winter. Magnificent country for walking—he must investigate it. There was a little balcony outside the window, with a cot on it. This, he supposed, was where Willowe took his naps.

"So you see," Fergus was saying, "anything you can say to help us would be a great boon to Kay. Now take, for instance, this business of all the doors being bolted. You know this house well—do you think anyone from the outside could have got in?"

Arthur Willowe fumbled aimlessly with a deck of cards. "I know it would, as you say, be a great boon to Kay if you could prove that someone from the outside came into the house, but I doubt if what I have to say would help you in the least. In the first place, Humphrey led a very retired life the past year or so. Save for his trips east, he practically never saw anyone outside of the household—except Vinton, of course. I can't think of a soul from outside who might be a candidate for suspicion.

"But I can be more definite than that. Yes, the doors were all bolted on the inside this morning. I'm an orderly man, Mr. O'Breen, if I'm nothing else, and I thought to check that as soon as Kay told me. So unless either Kay or Bill Harding took pains to cover up for him, the murderer couldn't have left this house."

"But look, Mr. Willowe. Supposing it was someone Mr. Garnett wanted to see privately. Garnett lets him in after the family has retired. They confer. Mr. X slips poison into the glass. Garnett lets Mr. X out, bolts the door after him, returns to the study, and drinks the poison. Wouldn't that be possible?"

Willowe gestured at the window. "You see that balcony, Mr. O'Breen? You will notice that it overlooks the front door. I was sitting out there last night, thinking over a—well, just meditating. I was there until midnight or a trifle past, and no one came or went. The medical evidence, I believe, shows that Humphrey must have been dead by then."

"How about the back door?"

"There is no bell there. In order to secure Humphrey's attention, your Mr. X would have had to make enough racket to rouse the household."

"But supposing it was someone scheduled to come at an appointed time? Then Mr. Garnett would simply be there waiting for him and let him in."

Willowe automatically shuffled the cards in his thin white hands. "A possibility, I admit. However, until you find any indication of the possible identity of your Mr. X, I think you may disregard it."

Fergus stopped pacing a moment. "Then you think the murderer is definitely one of the people in this house?"

"Is or was."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the man with the strongest motive is no longer here."

"The strongest motive? Then you know of others who have motives?"

"Please stop that pacing, Mr. O'Breen. No, I do not."

"No one?"

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"Of course, I know nothing about Miss Sallice. She returned with Humphrey from one of his trips east while I was—ill. Beyond that none of us knows anything."

"Sallice . . . Sallice . . . I've heard that name somewhere else recently." He paced a moment in silence, then turned sharply. "And how about you?"

"What about me, Mr. O'Breen?"

"What are you afraid of? Why were you so hysterical this morning?"

The cards slipped from Willowe's trembling fingers. "All right, I'll tell you. There is something eating me, devouring me, gnawing away like—like something fantastic and horrible and . . . I'm afraid of Humphrey."

Rand stared at the quivering little man. "Don't be an ass, man. Garnett's dead."

"That's just what I'm afraid of. His hate can be so much stronger now. And he did hate me. I think he kept me on here just so he could torture me—could keep referring to cars and accidents and . . ."—his voice all but broke—"Alicia."

"This is nonsense, Willowe. You weren't to blame for Alicia's death. A blowout on a slippery road—that can happen to anyone."

"I don't know, Colonel. It was so—so like me. To do everything wrong. Maybe I am to blame, after all. But that wouldn't make any difference—whether I really was or not. Humphrey thought that I was, and he hated me. And now his hate is free of his body, and I'm afraid." He stopped to pick up the cards, murmuring like a litany. "Afraid . . . afraid . . ."

"And what did you learn there?" Rand asked the detective as they came downstairs.

Fergus shook his head. "I don't quite know. But at least that hatred of Garnett's for Willowe gives us another motive. And this fear of his could be a fear of revenge from the dead. I don't know."

They found Camilla Sallice on the sunporch. Her back was to them, and it was hard to tell, but Rand suspected her of wiping away tears at the sound of their footsteps. He could not understand this girl: she seemed more affected than anyone else, almost more than Kay, by the death of Humphrey Garnett. It was as though this were the last of many sorrows and the hardest to bear. But why? he wondered. She had youth and beauty and a curious exotic charm. Why had she seemingly found her role in life such a tragic one?

"Miss Sallice," he said, "this is Mr. O'Breen. No doubt Kay has told you about him."

She rose and faced them with a half smile. "Of course. Please let me help you."

Fergus was staring at her intently. "Look," he said. "I wasn't sure until I heard you speak. You sing, don't you?"

"Why, yes."

"I knew the name was familiar. That recital Maureen dragged me to. You were good, too—though the little people know I'd sooner have heard a good rousing come-all-ye than those dirges you sang."

"Thank you, Mr. O'Breen. Won't you sit down? Now I'm afraid you'll have to ask me questions. I've been thinking as hard as I can, and I can't recall anything about Uncle Hum-

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phrey's death that would seem to help you. I went to bed directly after we left him and I fell asleep at once. But perhaps if you ask questions, I might know something I don't even know I know—if you can follow that."

"All right, I'll ask questions. Who are you?"

"I don't understand you."

"I said, who are you?"

"Why, I'm Camilla Sallice. Don't you remember? Colonel Rand just introduced us."

"Please, Miss Sallice. Let's not play games. Everyone I've talked with so far has admitted that he has no idea who you are, why you are here, or what your relation was to Mr. Garnett. Now I want you to tell us."

Camilla laughed. There was a faint touch of bitterness in her laughter. "Is that all? I was his protégée."

"Which means what?"

"A year ago I was singing in a night club in Washington. I'm afraid 'night club' flatters it a little. A detective's accuracy might call it a dive. And singing didn't pay so well unless you made a percentage on drinks, too. Uncle Humphrey was there one night, and he was very much impressed by my voice. He thought it was far too good for such a place."

"He was right," Fergus admitted grudgingly.

"He thought I should have a chance at a real career, and he offered to help me. I was a little suspicious at first—any girl would be—but he finally convinced me of his sincerity. I came out here with him, and he's been paying for my singing lessons. I think I'm almost ready to make a real start now."

"And that's all?"

"I don't wonder that you're a little suspicious. I know Kay was, and even that poor dear Mr. Willowe. But that's really all."

"You're fond of Mr. Willowe?"

"Yes, I suppose I am. He's so—so helpless. He feels he can never do anything well. He failed in business—he tried to write once—he couldn't even play chess with Uncle Humphrey. But he's been good to Kay, and he was good to his sister—at least, they tell me he was. And isn't that something in life—just being good to people?"

Fergus disregarded the philosophical point. "And does he return this fondness of yours?"

Camilla sighed. "I can tell from your tone that you know he doesn't. It's just that he won't understand. He thinks that Uncle Humphrey and I—well, that I'd taken Alicia's place. If he only knew how dreadfully wrong he was—"

"Look. Let's take a different angle. Can you see anybody in this house wanting to murder Mr. Garnett?"

"Frankly, Mr. O'Breen, no. I know this seems a strange thing to say when I was so fond of Uncle Humphrey, but I can't see him as the logical *victim* of a murder. There's no reason—unless of course it was Richard Vinton. He'd be much more apt to be the murderer."

"You mean Vinton is the murderer type—if there is such a thing?"

"Not Vinton. No. Uncle Humphrey. I'm not being very clear, am I? But then I don't feel very clear. I mean that it would have suited Uncle Humphrey's hard intricate mind to figure out a perfect plot and put it into effect. And he could hate people

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—Mr. Willowe, for an example."

"But you can think of no reason why anyone should have killed him?"

"No, I—" Camilla halted abruptly, and a dark shadow of fear passed over her weary face. "No reason at all," she said slowly, "unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"It *is* possible. I hadn't thought of that. It's twisted and horrible and fantastic—and yet it is possible. And it would be my fault . . ."

"What do you mean, Miss Sallice?"

"Camilla! You—you know something?" It was Kay standing in the open doorway, with Bill Harding like a loyal and slightly bewildered dog at her side.

Camilla did not turn her head. She looked straight into the red west, and the setting sun transfigured her face with its glow. The hard lines were gone for the moment, and with them her mysterious bitterness; there was left only a strange look of exalted pity. "It is nothing, Kay," she said softly.

"But if you do know anything, Camilla, you must tell us. You must!"

"Yes, Miss Sallice. If you can help us—"

Camilla turned to them at last. "I want to talk to you again," she said to Fergus. "But let me sleep on it first. I'm not sure . . ." And she walked slowly into the house.

"What a strange way to act," Kay observed hesitantly. "I've never been able to understand Camilla . . . I came to tell you dinner's almost ready, if you want to wash up or anything." She halted, then sent a glance of appeal to Harding.

"Excuse me," he said curtly, and followed after Camilla.

"Now, Detective. I wanted to talk to you alone. Tell me, please."

"Now, now, don't expect miracles, Client. I can't just talk with three people—five, including you two—and up and say, in accents dire, 'Thou art the man!' I've got to think about it."

She smiled a smile of urgent pleading. "But Fergus darling—oh, all right, Detective, then—can't you tell me anything?"

He paused in front of her. "I can tell you this: the fingerprints and the crumpled knave of diamonds are both plants, and I can prove it. Framing your Richard was as much the aim of this plot as killing your father. And it's practically sure—steady now, Client—that the plotter came from inside this house.

"This is going to be hard. It means that the truth may hit you quite as badly as Richard's arrest. So—so do you still want me to go on? I mean, there's a good chance that the mere proof of such a frame-up would get Richard off, but without proving who really did it. Jackson, from what I've heard, is intelligent—we could probably convince him of the plants. So I ask you, Client, straight out: Do you want me to go on?"

Kay looked at him earnestly. "You mean that it has to be—?"

Fergus nodded. "One of you? Yes."

"Should I—" She trembled a little under this burden of responsibility. "What do you think, Uncle Teddy?"

Colonel Rand put his arm around the girl's slim shoulders. After a slow harrumph, he said, "It's up to you, my dear. All I can say is this: Mr. O'Breen seems shrewd, and the truth is the truth. It will prevail in time, perhaps, but judicious human aid has never

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hurt it. That's all," he added gruffly.

Kay tossed her head decisively. "All right, Detective, go ahead. But there's one thing that worries me."

"What's that, Client?"

"You read a lot, in books and stories and things, about—" She hesitated. "Well, they say that . . ." She slowly gathered courage and blurted it out. ". . . that murderers don't stop."

Rand tightened the clasp of his arm. He hadn't thought of that. It was true, of course. To live here in a house where someone must be a murderer . . .

He smiled and lied. "Absurd notion, Kay my dear. A murderer's usually too frightened to think of another crime in his lifetime. It's purely a necessary fictional device to keep up the suspense a hundred pages after the first murder."

Rand couldn't decide if Kay believed him or not, but when he tried to pat her reassuringly, he could feel that she was shivering . . .

(*Continued on page 136*)

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HELEN NIELSEN**

TITLE: ***Death Scene***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Hollywood

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Leo was a cool, calculating opportunist. He was also a handsome devil, with nerve and vitality . . . all of which make a dangerous combination for a lonely and susceptible woman . . .*

THE WOMAN WHO HAD DRIVEN IN with the black Duesenberg fascinated Leo Manfred. She stood well, as if she might be a model or a dancer. Her ankles were arched and her calves firm. Leo wriggled out from under the car he was working on in order to examine her more closely.

She was dressed all in white—white hat with a wide, schoolgirl brim; white dress, fitted enough to make her body beckon him further; white shoes with high, spiked heels.

But it was more than the way she dressed and the way she stood. There was something strange about her, almost mysterious, and mystery didn't go well in the grease-and-grime society of Wagner's Garage. Leo got to his feet.

Carl Wagner, who was half again Leo's thirty years, and far more interested in the motor he'd uncovered than in any woman, blocked the view of her face. But her voice, when she spoke, was soft and resonant.

"Mr. Wagner," she said, "can you tell me when my automobile will be ready?"

Automobile—not car. Leo's active mind took note.

By this time Wagner was peering under the hood with the enthusiasm of a picnicker who had just opened a boxed banquet.

"It's a big motor, Miss Revere,"

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he answered, "and every cylinder has to be synchronized. Your father's always been very particular about that."

"My father—" She hesitated. There was the ghost of a smile. It couldn't be seen, but it was felt—the way some perfumes, Leo reflected, are felt. "—my father is very particular, Mr. Wagner. But it's such a warm day, and I don't feel like shopping."

Carl Wagner wasted neither words nor time. The fingers of one hand went poking into the pocket of his coveralls and dug up a set of keys at the same instant that he glanced up and saw Leo.

"My helper will take you home," he said. "You can tell your father that we'll deliver the car just as soon as it's ready."

If Leo Manfred had believed in fate, he would have thought this was it; but Leo believed in Leo Manfred and a thing called opportunity.

Women were Leo's specialty. He possessed a small black book containing the telephone numbers of more than 57 varieties; but no one listed in his book was anything like the passenger who occupied the back seat of the boss's new Pontiac as it nosed up into the hills above the boulevard.

Leo tried to catch her face in the rear-view mirror. She never looked at him. She stared out of the window or fussed with her purse. Her face was always half lost beneath the shadow of the hat. She seemed shy, and shyness was a refreshing challenge.

At her direction, the Pontiac wound higher and higher, beyond one new real estate development after another, until, at the crest of a long private driveway, it came to a stop at the entrance of a huge house. Architecturally, the house was a combination of Mediterranean and late Moorish, with several touches of early Hollywood. Not being architecturally inclined, Leo didn't recognize this; but he did recognize that it must have cost a pretty penny when it was built, and that the gardener toiling over a pasture-sized lawn couldn't have been supplied by the Department of Parks and Beaches.

And yet, there was a shabbiness about the place—a kind of weariness, a kind of nostalgia, that struck home as Leo escorted his passenger to the door.

"I know this house!" he exclaimed. "I've seen pictures of it. It has a name—" And then he stared at the woman in white, who had been given a name by Carl Wagner. "Revere," he remembered aloud. "Gordon Revere."

"Gavin Revere," she corrected.

"Gavin Revere," Leo repeated. "That's it! This is the house that the big film director Gavin Revere built for his bride, Monica Parrish. It's called—"

The woman in white had taken a key out of her purse.

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"Mon-Vere," she said.

Leo watched her insert the key into the lock of the massive door and then, suddenly, the answer to the mystery broke over him.

"If you're Miss Revere," he said, "then you must be the daughter of Monica Parrish. No wonder I couldn't take my eyes off you."

"Couldn't you?"

She turned toward him, briefly, before entering the house. Out of her purse she took a dollar bill and offered it; but Leo had glimpsed more than a stretch of long, drab hall behind her. Much more.

"I couldn't take money," he protested, "not from you. Your mother was an idol of mine. I used to beg dimes from my uncle—I was an orphan—to go to the movies whenever a Monica Parrish was playing."

Leo allowed a note of reverence to creep into his voice.

"When you were a very small boy, I suppose," Miss Revere said.

"Eleven or twelve," Leo answered. "I never missed a film your mother and father made—"

The door closed before Leo could say more; and the last thing he saw was that almost smile under the shadow of the hat.

Back at the garage, Carl Wagner had questions to answer.

"Why didn't you tell me who she was?" Leo demanded. "You knew."

Wagner knew motors. The singing cylinders of the Duesenberg were to him what a paycheck and a beautiful woman, in the order named, were to Leo Manfred. He pulled his head out from under the raised hood and reminisced dreamily.

"I remember the first time Gavin Revere drove this car in for an oil change," he mused. "It was three weeks old, and not one more scratch on it now than there was then."

"What ever happened to him?" Leo persisted.

"Polo," Wagner said. "There was a time when everybody who was anybody had to play polo. Revere wasn't made for it. Cracked his spine and ended up in a wheel chair. He was in and out of hospitals for a couple of years before he tried a comeback. By that time everything had changed. He made a couple of flops and retired."

"And Monica Parrish?"

"Like Siamese twins," Wagner said. "Their careers were tied together. Revere went down, Parrish went down. I think she finally got a divorce and married a Count Somebody—or maybe she was the one who went into that Hindu religion. What does it matter? Stars rise and stars fall, Leo, but a good motor. . . ."

Twelve cylinders of delight for Carl Wagner; but for Leo Manfred a sweet thought growing in the fertile soil of his rich, black mind.

"I'll take the car back when it's ready," he said.

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And then Wagner gave him one long stare and a piece of advice that wasn't going to be heeded.

"Leo," he said, "stick to those numbers in your little black book."

For a man like Leo Manfred, time was short. He had a long way to travel to get where he wanted to go, and no qualms about the means of transportation. When he drove the Duesenberg up into the hills, he observed more carefully the new developments along the way. The hills were being whittled down, leveled off, terraced and turned into neat pocket-estates as fast as the tractors could make new roads and the trucks could haul away surplus dirt. Each estate sold for $25,000 to $35,000, exclusive of buildings, and he would have needed an adding machine to calculate how much the vast grounds of Mon-Vere would bring on the open market.

As for the house itself—he considered that as he nosed the machine up the steep driveway. It might have some value as a museum or a landmark—Mon-Vere Estates, with the famous old house in the center. But who cared about relics any more? Raze the house and there would be room for more estates. It didn't occur to Leo that he might be premature in his thinking.

He had showered and changed into his new imported sports shirt; he was wearing his narrowest trousers, and had carefully groomed his mop of near-black hair. He was, as the rear-view mirror reassured him, a handsome devil, and the daughter of Gavin Revere, in spite of a somewhat ethereal quality, was a woman—and unless all his instincts, which were usually sound, had failed him, a lonely woman. Celebrities reared their children carefully, as if they might be contaminated by the common herd, which made them all the more susceptible to anyone with nerve and vitality.

When Leo rang the bell of the old house, it was the woman in white who answered the door, smiling graciously and holding out her hand for the keys. Leo had other plans. Wagner insisted that the car be in perfect order, he told her. She would have to take a test drive around the grounds. His job was at stake—He might get fired if he didn't obey the boss's orders.

With that, she consented, and while they drove Leo was able to communicate more of his awe and respect and to make a closer evaluation of the property, which was even larger than he had hoped. Not until they returned and were preparing to enter the garage did he manage to flood the motor and stall the car.

"It must be the carburetor," he said. "I'll have a look."

Adjusting the carburetor gave him additional time and an opportunity to get his hands dirty. They were in that condition when a

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man's voice called out from the patio near the garage.

"Monica? What's wrong? Who is that man?"

Gavin Revere was a commanding figure, even in a wheel chair. A handsome man with a mane of pure white hair, clear eyes, and strong features. The woman in white responded to his call like an obedient child.

When the occasion demanded, Leo could wear humility with the grace of his imported sports shirt. He approached Revere in an attitude of deep respect. Mr. Revere's car had to be in perfect condition. Would he care to have his chair rolled closer so that he could hear the motor? Would he like to take a test drive? Had he really put more than 90,000 miles on that machine himself?

Revere's eyes brightened, and hostility and suspicion drained away. For a time, then, he went reminiscing through the past, talking fluently while Leo studied the reserved Monica Revere at an ever decreasing distance. When talk wore thin, there was only the excuse of his soiled hands. The servants were on vacation, he was told, and the water in their quarters had been shut off. The gardener, then, had been a day man.

Leo was shown to a guest bath inside the house—ornate, dated, and noisy. A few minutes inside the building was all he needed to reassure himself that his initial reaction to the front hall had been correct: the place was a gigantic white elephant built before income taxes and the high cost of living. An aging house, an aging car—props for an old man's memories.

Down the hall from the bathroom he found even more interesting props. One huge room was a kind of gallery. The walls were hung with stills from old Revere-Parrish films—love scenes, action scenes, close-ups of Monica Parrish. Beauty was still there—not quite lost behind too much make-up; but the whole display reeked of an outdated past culminating in a shrine-like exhibition of an agonized death scene—exaggerated to the point of the ridiculous—beneath which, standing on a marble pedestal, stood a gleaming Oscar.

Absorbed, Leo became only gradually aware of a presence behind him. He turned. The afternoon light was beginning to fade and against it, half shadow and half substance, stood Monica Revere.

"I thought I might find you here," she said. She looked toward the death scene with something like reverence in her eyes. "This was his greatest one," she said. "He comes here often to remember."

"He" was pronounced as if in reference to a deity.

"He created her," Leo said.

"Yes," she answered softly.

"And now both of them are destroying you."

It was the only way to approach

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her. In a matter of moments she would have shown him graciously to the door. It was better to be thrown out trying, he thought. She was suddenly at the edge of anger.

"Burying you," Leo added quickly. "Your youth, your beauty—"

"No, please," she protested.

Leo took her by the shoulders. "Yes, please," he said firmly. "Why do you think I came back? Wagner could have sent someone else. But today I saw a woman come into that garage such as I'd never seen before. A lovely, lonely woman—"

She tried to pull away, but Leo's arms were strong. He pulled her closer and found her mouth. She struggled free and glanced back over her shoulder toward the hall.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked. "Hasn't he ever allowed you to be kissed?"

She seemed bewildered.

"You don't understand," she said.

"Don't I? How long do you think it takes for me to see the truth? A twenty-five-year-old car, a thirty-year-old house, servants on 'vacation.' No, don't deny it. I've got to tell you the truth about yourself. You're living in a mausoleum. Look at this room! Look at that stupid shrine!"

"Stupid!" she gasped.

"Stupid," Leo repeated. "A silly piece of metal and an old photograph of an overdone act by a defunct ham. Monica, listen. Don't you hear my heart beating?" He pulled her close again. "That's the sound of life, Monica—all the life that's waiting for you outside these walls. Monica—"

There was a moment when she could have either screamed or melted in his arms. The moment hovered—and then she melted. It was some time before she spoke again.

"What is your name?" she murmured.

"Later," Leo said. "Details come later."

The swiftness of his conquest didn't surprise Leo. Monica Revere had been sheltered enough to make her ripe for a man who could recognize and grasp opportunity.

The courtship proved easier than he dared hope. At first they met, somewhat furtively, at small, out-of-the-way places where Monica liked to sit in a half-dark booth or at candlelit tables. She shunned popular clubs and bright lights, and this modesty Leo found both refreshing and economical.

Then, at his suggestion, further trouble developed with the Duesenberg, necessitating trips to Mon-Vere where he toiled over the motor while Gavin Revere, fom his wheel chair, watched, directed, and reminisced. In due time Leo learned that Revere was firmly entrenched at Mon-Vere. "I will leave," he said, "in a hearse and not before"—which, when Leo pondered on it, seemed a splendid suggestion.

A man in a wheel chair. The situation posed interesting possibili-

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ties, particularly when the grounds on which he used the chair were situated so high above the city—so remote, so rugged, and so neglected. The gardener had been only for the frontage. Further inspection of the property revealed a sad state of disrepair in the rear, including the patio where Revere was so fond of sunning himself and which overlooked a sheer drop of at least 200 feet to a superhighway someone had thoughtfully constructed below. Testing the area with an old croquet ball found in the garage, Leo discovered a definite slope toward the drop and only a very low and shaky stucco wall as an obstacle.

Turning from a minute study of this shaky wall, Leo found Monica, mere yards away, watching him from under the shadow of a wide-brimmed straw hat. He rose to the occasion instantly.

"I hoped you would follow me," he said. "I had to see you alone. This can't go on, Monica. I can't go on seeing you, hearing you, touching you—but never possessing you. I want to marry you, Monica—I want to marry you now."

Leo had a special way of illustrating "now" that always left a woman somewhat dazed. Monica Revere was no exception. She clung to him submissively and promised to speak with Gavin Revere as soon as she could.

Two days later, Leo was summoned to a command performance in the gallery of Mon-Vere. The hallowed stills surrounded him; the gleaming Oscar and the grotesque death scene formed a background for Gavin Revere's wheel chair. Monica stood discreetly in the shadows. She had pleaded the case well. Marriage was agreeable to Gavin Revere—with one condition.

"You see around us the mementoes of a faded glory." Revere said. "I know it seems foolish to you, but, aside from the sentimental value, these relics indicate that Monica has lived well. I had hoped to see to it that she always would; but since my accident I am no longer considered a good insurance risk. I must be certain that Monica is protected when I leave this world, and a sick man can't do that. If you are healthy enough to pass the physical examination and obtain a life insurance policy for $50,000, taken out with Monica Revere named as beneficiary, I will give my consent to the marriage. Not otherwise.

"You may apply at any company you desire," he added, "provided, of course, that it is a reputable one. Monica, dear, isn't our old friend, Jeremy Hodges, a representative for Pacific Coast Mutual? See if his card is in my desk."

The card was in the desk.

"I'll call him and make the appointment, if you wish," Revere concluded, "but if you do go to Hodges, please, for the sake of an old man's pride, say nothing of why

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you are doing this. I don't want it gossiped around that Gavin Revere is reduced to making deals."

His voice broke. He was farther gone than Leo had expected—which would make everything so much easier. Leo accepted the card and waited while the appointment was made on the phone. It was a small thing for Leo to do—to humor an old man not long for this world.

While he waited, Leo mentally calculated the value of the huge ceiling beams and hardwood paneling, which would have to come out before the wreckers disposed of Gavin Revere's faded glory.

Being as perfect a physical specimen as nature would allow, Leo had no difficulty getting insurance. Revere was satisfied. The marriage date was set, and nothing remained except discussion of plans for a simple ceremony and honeymoon.

One bright afternoon on the patio, Leo and Monica, her face shaded by another large-brimmed hat, and Gavin Revere in his wheel chair, discussed the details. As Revere talked, recalling his own honeymoon in Honolulu, Monica steered him about. The air was warm, but a strong breeze came in from the open end of the area where the paving sloped gently toward the precipice.

At one point, Monica took her hands from the chair to catch at her hat, and the chair rolled almost a foot closer to the edge before she recaptured it. Leo controlled his emotion. It could have happened then, without any action on his part. The thought pierced his mind that she might have seen more than she pretended to see the day she found him at the low wall. Could it be that she too wanted Gavin Revere out of the way?

Monica had now reached the end of the patio and swung the chair about.

"Volcanic peaks," Revere intoned, "rising like jagged fingers pointing Godward from the fertile, tropical Paradise. . . ."

Monica, wearied, sank to rest on the shelf of the low wall. Leo wanted to cry out.

"A veritable Eden for young lovers," Gavin mused. "I remember it well. . . ."

Unnoticed by Monica, who was busy arranging the folds of her skirt, the old wall had cracked under her weight and was beginning to bow outward toward the sheer drop. Leo moved forward quickly. This was all wrong—Monica was his deed to Mon-Vere. All those magnificent estates were poised on the edge of oblivion.

The crack widened.

"Look out—"

The last words of Leo Manfred ended in a kind of eerie wail, for, in lunging forward, he managed somehow—probably because Gavin Revere, as if on cue, chose that instant to grasp the wheels of the chair and

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push himself about—to collide with the chair and thereby lose his balance at the very edge of the crumbling wall.

At the same instant, Monica rose to her feet to catch at her wind-snatched hat, and Leo had a blurred view of her turning toward him as he hurtled past in his headlong lunge into eternity.

At such moments, time stands as still as the horrible photos in Gavin Revere's gallery of faded glory, and in one awful moment Leo saw what he had been too self-centered to see previously—Monica Revere's face without a hat and without shadows. She smiled in a serene, satisfied sort of way, and in some detached manner of self-observation he was quite certain that his own agonized features were an exact duplication of the face in the death scene.

Leo Manfred was never able to make an accurate measurement; but it was well over 200 feet to the busy superhighway below.

In policies of high amounts, the Pacific Coast Mutual always conducted a thorough investigation. Jeremy Hodges, being an old friend, was extremely helpful. The young man, he reported, had been insistent that Monica Revere be named his sole beneficiary; he had refused to say why. "It's a personal matter," he had stated. "What difference does it make?" It had made no difference to Hodges, when such a high commission was at stake.

"It's very touching," Gavin Revere said. "We had known the young man such a short time. He came to deliver my automobile from the garage. He seemed quite taken with Monica."

Monica stood beside the statuette, next to the enlarged still of the death scene. She smiled softly.

"He told me that he was a great fan of Monica Parrish when he was a little boy," she said.

Jeremy handed the insurance check to Gavin and then gallantly kissed Monica's hand.

"We are all fans . . . and little boys . . . in the presence of Monica Parrish," he said. "How do you do it, my dear? What is your secret? The years have taken their toll of Gavin, as they have of me, but they never seem to touch you at all."

It was a sweet lie. The years had touched her—about the eyes, which she liked to keep shaded, and the mouth, which sometimes went hard—as it did when Jeremy left and Gavin examined the check.

"A great tragedy," he mused. "But as you explained to me at rehearsal, my dear, it really was his own idea. And we can use the money. I've been thinking of trying to find a good script."

Monica Parrish hardly listened. Gavin could have his dreams; she had her revenge. Her head rose proudly.

"All the critics agreed," she said. "I was magnificent in the death scene."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**MARTIN IVORY**
TITLE:	***Ripe for Plucking***
TYPE:	Crime and Detection
LOCALES:	Chicago and Los Angeles
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*From every possible standpoint—motive, opportunity, means—it looked like the "perfect crime." But the old financial expert added the prefix—"im-."*

EXCEPT FOR THE REVOLVER IN HIS POCKET, SMITH WAS MUCH LIKE THE other passengers who arrived on the evening flight from New York—glad to be on land again and eager to get away from the airport. He stowed his baggage in a locker, took a limousine to the business district, and entered a theater, where he watched a film until eleven o'clock. From there he walked to a corner and boarded a bus, paying the fare with exact change. The driver didn't even look up.

This suited Smith just fine. Because in a few minutes, if his calculations were correct, he would murder a man he had not seen in 28 years. True, the hazard of miscalculation remained. But his intended victim was an old man—hence, a creature of habit. He would probably be doing the same thing this Friday night that he did last Friday and a multitude of Friday nights before that.

If so, Smith knew where to find him . . .

Oliver Kingsbury Kraag eased a jigger of 86-proof bourbon down his 76-year-old throat and lumbered to his typewriter, a device nearly as worn as he. Outside, the decaying neighborhood had settled to a brooding pre-midnight calm. Kraag put his glass aside and pulled up a chair. For many years now he had been writing his Sunday column at this hour on Friday night.

Kraag slipped paper into the machine and began to type. His yel-

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lowed fingers worked with the assurance born of having met thousands of long-gone deadlines:

By O. K. Kraag

This is my annual primer for people investing in the stock market for the first time.

When I started in this business shortly after the turn of the century, I gained the confidence, by means not germane here, of one of the greatest swindlers of all time. He had risen from obscurity to amass wealth by the simple expedient of stealing with his left hand while his victims watched his right.

I will not identify this man by name. Suffice to say that one night, in an elegant restaurant long since demolished for what we call urban renewal, he lingered too long in his cups and remarked: "Ollie, the ordinary investor in common stock is a chicken ripe for plucking."

Kraag rambled on. Kraag, the financial reporter with the photographic memory; Kraag, the insinuating, pot-bellied gargoyle who had charmed a hundred corporate chieftains into revealing secrets for print that they hadn't told their own tax attorneys; Kraag, alone in his dilapidated house, striving to warn the newborn lambs in the stock market that wolves might be lurking behind tomorrow's ticker tape.

The old man paused to chuckle at an especially tart phrase. His pleasure was interrupted by the jarring ring of the front doorbell . . .

The man on the threshold wore a homburg and a gray topcoat and his face loomed six inches above Kraag's.

Kraag squinted—then recognition came. He beamed, a beatific, all-embracing smile which over the years he had learned to bestow on saint and sinner alike.

"Edwin Donahue Smith," Kraag pronounced.

"Your memory," his visitor replied, "is still superb."

"I sent you to prison in '34. Haven't seen you since. Come on in." Kraag stepped aside. "Your coat?"

"I won't be long."

"I was writing my weekly column. I've retired and spend my days with a few chums in a broker's boardroom, watching the tape go by. There's not much else for me to do any more. But I still write a column for the Sunday financial page."

"Don't let me interrupt."

"I won't," Kraag said. "Frankly, I don't like you any more now than I did the day we met."

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Kraag limped as he ushered Smith into his study. The pain came now whenever he tried to walk after sitting a while at his typewriter. Smith, a thin man in his late fifties, gazed alertly around a room littered with faded clippings that detailed events long forgotten. "Oliver, I'm told your wife passed away. Who's keeping house for you?"

"So you remember her," Kraag said, settling again at the machine. "My wife always remembered you. You sent her an orchid, in those innocent days when we called you a boy wizard of finance and you sought to bribe the press with trifles. Nobody had ever given my wife an orchid before. Dear woman, she died four years ago. I'm quite alone."

Kraag resumed typing. As he typed, he talked—a trick he had used to cow cub reporters with college degrees. "I hear you're a prosperous real estate operator now. Southern California, or some place where the sun always shines."

"I have a few things going."

Kraag completed a paragraph, then absently rubbed his immense nose. "Edwin," he said, "I'm wondering why you've come back to see me. I took my information to that Federal attorney in 1934 because you were stealing from your investors. I've never had a single regret."

Smith moved to where he could read over Kraag's shoulder. "If you recall," Smith said pleasantly, "I promised after the trial to kill you."

"Sometimes," Kraag observed, "people say things they don't mean."

"I meant it," Smith replied. "Before you showed so much interest in the welfare of the widows and orphans among my stockholders, I was married to a beautiful woman. I enjoyed wealth and prestige. I was a famous man in a famous city. When they let me go, I had nothing to my name but a twenty-dollar bill and a prison-made suit."

"You seem to have overcome that."

"But you stole a part of my life. What should have been the most rewarding years, the prime years. I've waited a long time to pay you back."

"And this, then, is the payoff?"

"Exactly." Smith drew the revolver from his pocket. "I'm here on a short stopover between New York and Los Angeles. Since we've had no contact in twenty-eight years, and my promise to you in the courtroom was not overheard, nobody will connect me with your impending death."

"You always had a devious mind," Kraag said softly. He typed on:

> And so, while it is true that the doctrine of full disclosure protects the ordinary investor, all too rarely does the ordinary inves-

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tor seek out the disclosed facts. Thus, there has never been a time when charlatans have occupied positions of such high reputation and great influence in the investment world as they hold now.

"Same old Kraag," Smith said. "Still guarding his flock."

"You mean business, don't you?"

"Positively."

"I'll end it quickly then." Kraag's fingers moved over the keys for the last time:

Tips for Tape Watchers—old friends, keep an eye on these: Consolidated Edison, Spiegel, International Tel & Tel, Hupp, Schenley, Otis Elevator, Montgomery Ward, Erie Lackawanna. And good luck!

Kraag signed a "finis" mark, then contemplated his last column with wistful fondness. "The Erie and Lackawanna Railway," Kraag mused, savoring the words. "I don't suppose a low-born knave like you would know about anything like that." He looked up, his rheumy eyes animated with sudden anger. "Well, if you're going to catch that plane to California," he snarled, "get it over with."

Smith obliged by blowing a hole in Kraag's head.

Smith dumped the gun in a sewer four blocks from Kraag's home. He took a bus downtown. From there he cabbed to the airport.

On the flight he drank four highballs. Now that Kraag was dead, he realized with unexpected melancholy that a mainspring of his life had been removed.

Another surprise awaited him at the Los Angeles airport. A team of plainclothes men met the plane and escorted Smith to an office occupied by a detective lieutenant, an owlish man who smiled entirely without humor.

"Please sit down," the lieutenant invited. "Sorry to inconvenience you, but we're going to run a cordite test. To see if you fired a gun during your stopover in Chicago."

"Ridiculous."

"No doubt. But a financial writer named Oliver Kingsbury Kraag was murdered in Chicago. A copy boy who stopped at his home to pick up his column found the body."

"What's that to do with me?"

"According to the police in Chicago, you're the Edwin Donahue Smith that Kraag sent to prison in 1934 for a stock swindle. They phoned us. We've learned that your flight schedule put you in Chicago at just the time Kraag was killed."

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"What of it? This Kraag—I remember him now, it's been twenty-eight years—a lot of people could have had reason to kill him."

"Kraag was writing his column just before he was shot. You're in it."

"You're trying to trick me," Smith said. "If I shot a man, I wouldn't allow him to leave a dying message incriminating me."

"Kraag's memory," the lieutenant explained, "was photographic. And he was a stock expert. He'd been watching the tape in boardrooms all his life. At the end of his column he listed some stocks. 'Tips for Tape Watchers,' he called it. Now, Kraag had never touted stocks in his column before. All his life he'd argued against buying stocks on tips and rumors. Kraag's financial editor looked at that list and deduced Kraag's message.

"Every stock on an exchange has a symbol to represent it on the tape. The symbol for American Telephone and Telegraph, for instance, is the letter T. The symbols for the stocks on Kraag's list are—let's see—Consolidated Edison, ED; Spiegel, SM; International Tel & Tel, IT; Hupp, H; Schenley, SH; Otis Elevator, OT; Montgomery Ward, M; and Erie Lackawanna, E. Put them all together and they spell out—ED SMITH SHOT ME."

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**MICHAEL GILBERT**
TITLE:	***The Catalytic Agent***
TYPE:	Secret Service Story
AGENT:	Mr. Behrens
LOCALE:	England
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Catalysis: the causing or accelerating of a chemical change by the addition of a substance (catalyst) which is not permanently affected by the reaction . . . It can happen in the secret service too!*

MR. BEHRENS ADJUSTED HIS GLASSES, aligned his left foot against the tell-tale, raised the heavy brass dart until it was level with his eye, and flipped it. As it left his hand the door of the Public Bar of the Lamb opened and a man came in.

Mr. Behrens' opponents said, "Double four. Nice shot." The newcomer said, "Good God, if it isn't Mr. Behrens."

Mr. Behrens came out of the trance which affects a dart player trying for his final double, blinked, and said, "I've got a feeling I ought to know your face."

"No reason you should," said the newcomer. He was a man in his early forties with hair already thinning and graying, a long thick nose and shrewd brown eyes. "When you last saw me I was fifteen and spotty."

"Now wait a minute," said Mr. Behrens. "Wait a minute. Talbot. No. Tabor."

"Right, sir. Alan Tabor. And I hope I didn't put you off your throw."

"Not half you didn't," said his opponent. "If a bomb went off in the next room *he'd* still get his double four."

He put down the half pint of beer which was his tribute to Mr. Behrens' skill. He didn't really feel sour about it. But he was the local

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champion and for a week now he had been trying, with little success, to win a beer from Mr. Behrens. "I must be off. See you this evening, I hope."

"You shall have your revenge this evening," said Mr. Behrens. And then to Tabor, "Have you come in here for a drink, or to eat? If you're going to have lunch, perhaps you'd care to join me? Or you may have people with you? I take it you're motoring."

"I'm alone," said Tabor. "I'd love to have lunch with you. And I haven't a car, I walked."

"Then you must have walked a long way," said Mr. Behrens. "Because there are few lonelier pubs in England than this one. That's one of the things I like about it."

"I come out here quite a lot from Ravenshoe," said Tabor. "It's a bit bleak now in winter. But you ought to see it in spring and summer."

"I've seen it in spring *and* in summer," said Mr. Behrens. "I'm one of Ruby's most regular customers. Isn't that right, Ruby?"

"That's right," said Ruby. "Spring and autumn. Like the rates. What'll it be? There's hot steak and kidney pie, or cold beef."

Resident guests were a rare occurrence at the Lamb, so Mr. Behrens and Mr. Tabor had the coffee room to themselves.

"You're at the Refinery, of course," said Mr. Behrens. "When you mentioned Ravenshoe the penny ought to have dropped. After I had failed to teach you the rudiments of French and German, you went off and specialized in Science, didn't you? And got a science scholarship at Oxford?"

"They didn't call it a scholarship," said Tabor. There was an edge of bitterness in his voice. "Words like 'scholarship' are reserved for respectable subjects like Latin and Greek. But it came to the same thing—other people paid for my education. The odd thing was that the further I got, the more money people seemed willing to splash out."

"Invest," said Mr. Behrens with a crinkled smile. "Invest. Where did you go after Oxford?"

"Leipzig. After that I was going to Moscow—but Fate willed otherwise."

"Of course. That would have been 1939. A pity." Mr. Behrens toyed with the idea of asking him what he had done during the war, but decided that it might be tactless. Instead he said, "I've always heard that Ravenshoe was an interesting place. You produce more than oil and petrol, don't you?"

"Oil and petrol are almost a sideline. We sell enough to pay our overhead. I suppose you wouldn't care to look over it? You were always rather scornful of science, as I remember."

"That was when I was thirty-five and you were fifteen," said Mr. Behrens. "Our respective outlooks may have developed in the interim."

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"It really is rather a wonderful place," said Tabor. "We can turn out end products which even five years ago no one would have associated with crude oil. Plastics, nylon stockings, paint, explosives."

"I am prepared to admit," said Mr. Behrens, "that modern science is capable of almost anything. But it has *not* yet turned out anything quite like Ruby's, or her mother's, steak and kidney pie."

He regarded with a shade more than avuncular approval the trim, but well developed, figure of the eighteen-year-old daughter of the house, who was approaching them with a loaded and steaming tray.

—

"That's the Primary Distillation Unit," said Tabor, pointing to something which looked like a church tower under repair. "We could climb the scaffolding if you want, but you won't see any more from the top. The temperature's kept constant at 1000°—that's nothing out of the way, of course, but it's quite hot as refining processes go."

He raked open one of the boiler-plate hatches and Mr. Behrens peered into an antechamber of the Inferno. Gas, distilled from the oil, was carried round through pipes and ignited in a brick-kiln oven. The flames glowed white at the center of the heat, tawny-red and orange round the outer edges. The roaring was still in his ears as he moved away.

"So you don't call that hot?" he said.

"Chemically, no. We can produce ten times that heat. But, as a matter of fact, in a lot of ways it's *too* hot. You see—look here, how much of this are you really understanding?"

"I'm with you so far, I think," said Mr. Behrens. "You heat up the crude oil and distill off different products with different boiling points. Gas at the top, then petrol, after that paraffin, and diesel—and asphalt at the bottom. And the whole process is commonly known as 'cracking.' Right?"

"Correct," said Tabor. "But the trouble is that you can do a lot of harm to the crude oil if you have to heat it as high as one thousand degrees centigrade. On the other hand—it won't crack at less."

Mr. Behrens said, though whether jocularly or not it was hard to detect, "The Nazis had just the same problem, I believe. When interrogating prisoners, I mean. With some of them they had to use so much force to crack them that the prisoner disintegrated in the process."

They were walking away from the Distillation Unit toward an affair shaped like a lopsided hourglass, with trimmings. Tabor checked for a moment in his stride, looked sideways at Mr. Behrens, and said, with a shade of hesitancy in his voice, "That's an odd analogy." They walked for a few steps

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in silence, and Tabor added, "Chemically, we overcome the difficulty in rather an ingenious way. We mix a catalyst with the fuel—usually china clay—then the mixture can be cracked at much lower temperatures. That's the machine that does it."

Mr. Behrens stared at the squat apparatus. It had, he thought, an evil look. "I've heard oil-men talk about a 'cat cracker'," he said. "I'd no idea that was what it was."

"There's not a lot to see," said Tabor. "No moving parts. No action. No excitement. It's rather an efficient piece of apparatus, all the same."

"It has a sort of feminine, yet feline, look about it, hasn't it?" said Mr. Behrens. "I wasn't only referring to its shape—although there's something in that too. I meant its general appearance of dangerous docility. One has the feeling that inside those deceptive curves, processes of unsuspected ferocity are taking place."

"You're an odd chap," said Tabor. But there was an undercurrent of affection in his voice.

"I should never have made a scientist," agreed Mr. Behrens. "I am far too fanciful."

A week later Mr. Behrens and Mr. Tabor both happened to go up to London. Mr. Behrens went by train. He had an appointment with his bank manager. Tabor went by car. He also had an appointment.

Tabor parked his car in a side street near Paddington Station, walked back down the Harrow Road, and turned into Saint Mary's Terrace. This runs up to the canal, sometimes hopefully referred to as London's Little Venice; on this bleak winter's day Saint Mary's Terrace was an empty stretch of road beside a dirty reach of water.

There was only one human being in sight. He was a huge man, further enlarged by a tentlike overcoat, with a red face, and a corona of white hair which ruffled in the breeze. Tabor hurried toward him, both hands outstretched. The big man awaited him impassively.

"Paulus!"

"My dear Alan."

They shook hands warmly, Tabor looking into the older man's eyes as if there was some reassurance he hoped to find there.

"I remember this place from my youth in London," said Professor Paulus Mann. "When I suggested meeting you here, I visualized us sitting, side by side, on a bench watching the ducks in the canal, and the pretty barges going up and down. I had forgotten the time of year and the weather."

"There's a pub down there," said Tabor. "Or there was ten years ago. They used to have an open fire in the Saloon Bar too."

"Splendid," said the Professor. "We will sit all afternoon and talk."

"Not in an English pub you won't," said Tabor.

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At about the same moment, Mr. Behrens was seated in the private office of Mr. Fortescue, the manager of the Westminster Branch of the London and Home Counties Bank. The room was, in Mr. Behrens' considered opinion, one of the most appalling in London. It seemed to have been designed by a sanitary engineer, being paneled—if such was the correct word—in three shades of brown porcelain. An elaborate chandelier sprouted from a coffee-colored porcelain rosette; flowers in golden porcelain patterned the walls, and an enormous chocolate-colored porcelain overmantle lowered above a tiny fire.

In front of the fire stood an old, plain, brown desk, and on the desk stood a photograph of Mrs. Fortescue, in Court dress, and two telephones, neither of which was connected with a public line. Mr. Behrens had once heard Mr. Fortescue keep the Home Secretary waiting on one while he spoke to the Foreign Secretary on the other.

Fortescue now placed the tips of his fingers together, in a manner much approved by bank managers of the old school, and said, "It's an extremely delicate situation. You do see that, don't you?"

"Oh, I do," said Mr. Behrens.

"It is not a case in which direct or forceful methods are likely to achieve anything but disaster. It is not a problem which would appeal to Mr. Calder. That is why we have turned to you."

Mr. Behrens was not sure whether to take this as a compliment or not. He contented himself with merely saying, "Yes."

"Was Tabor at all suspicious?"

"I don't think so. No. Fortunately *he* recognized *me* first. That was a great help."

"And he would find out, if he chose to inquire, that you were an habitué of the Lamb."

"I have been using it for over a year. And so, incidentally, has he. We might have met at any time. It just happened to be last Saturday."

"We can only hope," said Mr. Fortescue, "that we are not too late." There was a touch of genuine sadness in his voice. "Professor Mann is in London. He arrived last night. Tabor motored up to town this morning. I have no doubts they are deep in talk now, even as we are."

"Did you have the Professor followed?" asked Mr. Behrens.

"Certainly not," said Mr. Fortescue. "Certainly not. As I told you, this situation is extremely delicate. There is, on the face of it, nothing at all—apart, one would hope, from a certain natural patriotism—to prevent Tabor leaving this country and working for our enemies. We are not at war. And Tabor is not in Government employment. Nor is he subject to the Official Secrets Act."

"But he is too good a scientist for us to lose him."

Mr. Fortescue was not a man given to extravagant statement. So

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when he said, "He is one of the ablest scientists in the world," the words conveyed more to Mr. Behrens than an elaborate eulogy.

"He has specialized in cosmo-electronics, which is the electronics of the Universe. It is a study which bears the same relationship to electronics as electronics does to old-fashioned electricity. It is almost more a Logic than a Science. There are no blueprints. The handful of men whose minds are capable of understanding and studying it make up their own rules, draw their own charts, and speak their own language."

"And Professor Paulus Mann is one of them?"

"He was a pioneer. Tabor studied under him at Leipzig. I do not suppose that the Professor would claim to be in the front rank now. Nevertheless it was a very astute move sending him over here. Tabor will listen to him if he will listen to no one else."

"I remember Tabor at school," said Mr. Behrens. "A very withdrawn boy. I used to imagine that he was bullied, but in retrospect. I doubt it. He was too self-contained to make a good subject for bullies. A natural enemy of the Establishment. Do you think we have any chance of keeping him?"

"By force, no chance at all. If we keep him, it will have to be by conviction."

"Are you suggesting," said Mr. Behrens, "that I should corner the poor young man and lecture him on the Western way of life?"

"It may come to that," said Mr. Fortescue seriously. "Much will depend on what success Professor Mann is having with him now. I must ask you to stay within reach of a telephone for a while."

On his way out Mr. Behrens paused for a moment in the anteroom to admire the Landseer painting which hung on the wall. It was an allegorical study showing Thrift conducting a tug of war with Extravagance. In the circumstances he thought it rather appropriate.

It was almost exactly three weeks later, at four o'clock in the afternoon, that the call came.

"He has thrown up his job at the Refinery," said the thin voice of Mr. Fortescue. "He did not even offer notice. He told them he was going, and he simply walked out."

"That's bad. Where is he now?"

"He's taken his stuff out to that public house—the one you mentioned."

"The Lamb. Yes. Is there any reason to think that he's actually contemplating leaving the country?"

"No direct evidence. But Professor Mann is flying back to Dusseldorf on Monday. And he has booked two seats."

"If Tabor *is* at the Lamb," said Mr. Behrens, looking out of the window at the snow, which had started to fall again, "he might not get to London Airport all that easily on Monday."

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"We can't rely on him being snowbound. You'll have to go over and talk to him."

Mr. Behrens had received some steep instructions from Mr. Fortescue from time to time, but this seemed to him to be nearly the steepest. He opened his mouth to protest, but shut it again. All the objections which were occurring to him would already have occurred to all superiors. If this really was the only possible course, slight though the chance of success might be, it would have to be pursued to the end.

He said, "I shall have to tell some story to account for my arrival."

"Tell no story at all. Explain exactly who you are, and what you are doing."

"You think that is wise?"

"Certainly. The other side are not fools. They will have warned him against you already."

"Of course," said Mr. Behrens. "Very well. I'll see what I can do."

His aunt, with whom he shared the old Rectory at Lamperdown said crossly, "You can't be thinking of going out in weather like this."

"The call of duty," said Mr. Behrens. "One of my old pupils in difficulties."

"Fiddlesticks," said the old lady, who was no fool. "It's one of your jobs. I suppose Mr. Calder's in it with you. And that dog of his."

"No," said Mr. Behrens sadly. "I fear this is something I have to do on my own."

It was not a pleasant drive. As dusk fell, the snow thickened, crusting the windshield and collecting on the blades of the wiper. After a few miles Mr. Behrens had to stop his car and get out with a cloth to clear away the accumulation. On the first occasion he was incautious enough to do this on a slight upgradient, and found, when he tried to restart, that his wheels were unable to grip the road, which had frozen under fresh fallen snow. He succeeded eventually in sliding backward onto a level patch, and finally got going with a wild scurry. After that he chose his stopping places more carefully.

It was nearly eight o'clock when he saw the welcoming lights of the Lamb. The last hour had been a nightmare of crawling along frozen, humpbacked roads which dropped, on either side, into black ditches. There was nothing amiss with Mr. Behrens' nerves, and he had unexpected reserves of stamina in his thin body, but he could not refrain from a sigh of relief as he climbed out of the driving seat.

Ruby was in the empty public bar, polishing glasses. "Not that we'll get any customers on a night like this," she said. "We got your telephone message, I put a hot bottle in your bed."

"Good girl," said Mr. Behrens. "Is Mr. Tabor here?"

"He's in the coffee room. I told him you were coming."

"Did he seem to be surprised?"

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"No. He said he'd been expecting you'd be over."

"I'll join him in a moment. And make us up a good fire. We may be sitting up late tonight. We've got a lot to talk about."

For a moment Ruby's brown eyes rested on him shrewdly. He wondered if she had any idea what was going on. Tabor had been alone in the place for some days, and a man who is unhappy and undecided would confide in any sympathetic listener.

"Don't you go keeping him up late," said Ruby. "He's got a lot on his mind."

"So have I," said Mr. Behrens sadly. "So have I."

"Can you honestly, and in all conscience," said Tabor, "give me a single reason why I shouldn't go?"

Mr. Behrens got up, selected three more lumps of coal from the nearly empty scuttle, and placed them on the fire.

"I've spent the best part of four hours giving you reasons," he said. He had forced himself to keep any traces of weariness, any touch of exasperation, out of his voice. The fact that Tabor had been willing to argue at all must, in itself, be a hopeful sign. His mind was not yet closed.

"And what do they amount to? That the world is divided into two halves, the West and the East. The rights and the wrongs. The Goods and the Bads—like a film."

"It's not quite as simple as that—"

"You're arguing a prepared case, like a barrister who's been briefed. I accept that you've got your job to do—you're acting on orders. You've been very frank with me about that. But it doesn't make your case any stronger."

"If I didn't believe what I've been telling you," said Mr. Behrens flatly, "I shouldn't have bothered to come out on a night like this."

"All right," said Tabor. "I take that back. I'll accept that you, personally, believe what you're saying. But that's because you've been conditioned to believe it. Very few people in the West are capable of thinking internationally any more. But if you could only get outside your traditional English skin for a moment, shake off the moss, clear away the cobwebs, you'd see what everyone else had been seeing for a long time now—that you're finished. You're dying on your feet. Every symptom of degeneracy is there. Softness, selfishness, fear. The sort of softness that's bringing up a whole generation to think that it can do what it likes, without facing unpleasant consequences. For God's sake, what sort of mess do you think they'll make of the world, after an education like that!"

He paused as if inviting comment, but Mr. Behrens found nothing to say. He wasn't particularly hopeful, himself, of the generation which was growing up around him.

"And for selfishness—read your

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newspaper. Fatuous go-slow strikes, when now's the moment, if ever, to be going fast. Mad industrial disputes, which not only do neither side any good, but which both sides *know* in advance will do nothing but harm. Do you think they're working according to the rule in China today?"

"I think they probably are," said Mr. Behrens. "Only it happens to be rather a different sort of rule."

Tabor ignored this. His knuckles showed white as he gripped the arms of the chair.

"And fear," he said. "The smell of fear is everywhere. It rises like the steam off their backs, where they squat in the rain in Trafalgar Square. Squat like aboriginees, rocking and moaning, in front of some ju-ju they are trying to propitiate."

Mr. Behrens thought, "He's arguing with himself. And the real trouble is, he doesn't know whether he wants to win or lose. Half of him's on my side. One good pull, and I'll have him."

He said, "Aren't you overlooking one thing? And isn't it the one thing that matters? I'll take your own example. I haven't much to say for the way we bring up children. We used to be a lot too strict with them, and nowadays we're a great deal too easy. We're about due for a swing of the pendulum in the other direction. But as for strikes and antinuclear demonstrations—we could, in theory, stop them if we wanted to. The executive has the power. It could break strikes with troops and break up demonstrations with mounted policemen. But in practice it can't, and it doesn't, because we value freedom above expediency. It's taken us four hundred years to get there, and I'm not prepared to abandon the position just because another country has tried a new system, and found that it paid quick dividends."

"Freedom," said Tabor. "You're prepared to accept inefficiency, selfishness, slackness, lack of purpose, timidity, and greed—provided you have on the other side of the scales, a fictitious thing called freedom."

"Certainly," said Mr. Behrens. "And it isn't fictitious. If *you'd* ever lived in a police state, you'd know that."

"What do you mean by a police state?"

Mr. Behrens was desperately tired. But he could feel that Tabor was even more tired. If he had not been, he would not, perhaps, have presented him with such an opening.

"In Belgrade last year," Behrens said, "a meeting was called. Not a political meeting. The question to be discussed was the formation of a new national theater. The government objected. They did not ban the meeting, they simply gave it out that they did not approve. Some hundreds of people came. Many because they had not heard of the ban. Some from idle curiosity, or even by mistake, because they happened to be passing and stopped to

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listen. As soon as the meeting started, the police blocked all exits. No one was allowed to leave until their name and address had been taken and confirmed. For some days nothing happened. Then the police visited every house on the list—every house—there were hundreds, so it took time—and broke every window in every house. No one, of course, dared to stop them, but one or two people did ask them why they were doing it, and the police said, 'You make trouble for us, we make trouble for you.' It was midwinter, so it wasn't amusing. That's what I mean by a police state."

There was a long silence. Then Tabor said, "That's just a story you've heard. It may not be true."

"I assure you it is true," said Mr. Behrens. "I was at the meeting myself."

Tabor started to pace up and down the room. Mr. Behrens said to himself, "I believe that's fixed him." It was at this moment that he heard the telephone ringing, out in the hall. Such was his preoccupation that it could have been ringing for some time. Tabor seemed to be unconscious of it, too.

The ringing stopped. There was a pause. Then the door opened and Ruby came in. She was wearing a quilted dressing gown, and a gray woollen scarf round her neck, on which her tousled head rested like a single cut flower. She looked indignant.

"If you're going to sit up nattering till three in the morning you might take your own telephone calls."

They both stared at her. Mr. Behrens had the irrelevant thought that when girls displayed their figures they often looked absurd. It was when they hid them that they always became attractive.

"It's for you," she said to Tabor. "Someone from London."

Tabor followed her out into the hall. Mr. Behrens put the last of the coal onto the fire and tried to shake off a sense of impending disaster.

It was a long five minutes before Tabor came back into the room. When he did so, Mr. Behrens knew, before he even opened his mouth, that something of decisive importance had happened.

Tabor said, "This evening your police, your trustworthy nonpolitical, judicially controlled police, arrested Professor Mann on a trumped-up charge of smuggling. He's in a cell in Cannon Row Police Station now."

Mr. Behrens could think of nothing to say.

"It looks as if I shall have a busy day tomorrow. I'm going to bed." Tabor went out again, shutting the door quietly but firmly behind him.

Mr. Behrens sat for a long time by the dying fire. He had no idea how it had been worked, but it seemed to him that the opposition was still a step ahead of them.

Presently he heard the sound which he had been unconsciously

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waiting for. The telephone was ringing. It was Mr. Fortescue.

"Had Tabor heard the news?"

"About Professor Mann? Yes."

"Somebody telephoned him?"

"About half an hour ago. It came at a most unfortunate moment."

"It was a clever piece of timing," said Mr. Fortescue. He sounded as if he was discussing the French defense to an attack on the Queen's rook side.

"It was certainly effective," said Mr. Behrens. "How did they do it?"

"Someone from their Embassy telephoned Scotland Yard and told them that Professor Mann had offered one of their Embassy servants eight ounces of cocaine, for payment in dollars. And that he was leaving England by air tomorrow. They had to do something, of course. The Professor was uncooperative. I believe he spat in the Superintendent's eye. So they pulled him in. He'll be released first thing tomorrow morning—with an apology, of course."

"I'm afraid the harm will have been done," said Mr. Behrens. He was tired, more tired than he could ever remember feeling in his life before, and something of this must have reached Mr. Fortescue. "I am sure you have done all that anyone could have done," he said, and then, as if embarrassed by this unusual display of sentiment, rang off.

Mr. Behrens crept upstairs to bed. There were only two guest rooms. He had to pass Tabor's door to get to his own. The door was ajar, and Mr. Behrens could not help seeing, in the bright moonlight which was streaming through the window, that Tabor's bed was empty and unused.

"He can't have gone already," he thought. "Or if he has, he won't get very far in this snow."

But he was too tired to worry any further about it. He fell into bed and to sleep . . .

When Mr. Behrens woke next morning the sun was shining. He crept out of bed, and hobbled to the window. He felt as stiff as if the long struggle he had engaged in the night before had been physical.

Outside he looked at a white world. Five miles away the Ravenshoe Refinery stood out, black and sharp against the snowy hillside. He could even see, in clear silhouette, the curious outline of the catalytic cracker. It seemed to be grinning at him.

As he turned away, there was a knock at the door. Mr. Behrens snatched up a dressing gown and shouted, "Come in."

It was Ruby.

"It's nearly ten o'clock," she said. "Dad sent me up to see if you wanted any breakfast."

"I'll be down in five minutes," said Mr. Behrens. "Is Mr. Tabor up yet?"

When Ruby failed to answer, Mr. Behrens looked up and saw that her face was scarlet.

He said, "I'm afraid we sat up

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very late last night. I'm sorry if we kept you up as well."

Ruby sat down on the bed, and started to cry, softly. Mr. Behrens, being a sensible man, said nothing. He sat down beside her, and put his arm round her.

"Extraordinary," said Mr. Fortescue.

"It was the catalytic process," said Mr. Behrens. "Tabor explained it all to me that day at the refinery. A substance will stand up to any amount of heat and pressure by itself. But add one simple, outside, ingredient and it will dissolve at once. In an oil refinery, I understand, the thing they use is china clay."

"And in this case, it was Ruby."

"She's a very nice girl," said Mr. Behrens. "They're getting married next week, and I've promised to be best man. He's taking back his job at the Refinery, until he can get some pure research work."

"And he's entirely changed his mind about leaving us?"

"Oh, entirely. Ruby doesn't approve of Europe."

"I see," said Mr. Fortescue.

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Just before going to press with this issue of EQMM, we received a brand-new story by George Sumner Albee about an American counterespionage agent. We simply couldn't resist the impulse to couple two secret service stories, both by outstanding authors. You will find the contrast interesting—indeed, we found it fascinating—the contrast between British and American intelligence ops at work, one at home, the other in a foreign land, and each playing a deadly serious, if not a desperate, game of wits at high, tremendously high, stakes . . . Read and enjoy!

THE ANALYTIC AGENT

by GEORGE SUMNER ALBEE

ALGIERS IS PRONOUNCED NOT AL-giers but El Jay; the Sahara is spelt with a Z and looks more like Texas range-land than it does the dune-breasted desert you see in the movies; and there are other things in North Africa about which we Americans have unrealistic notions. But there are things, also, about which we are quite realistic.

The young Arab who stepped down at Bou Zanna from an old Chevrolet truck piled high with canned tomatoes and slab codfish wore scuffed slippers with tire-tread soles, an undergarment like a rayon nightgown, a burnoose of whitish wool to reflect the sun and keep him cool, and a pale blue turban. Not having bathed for nine weeks, he stank, but in the dry air not too badly—something like a bunch of over-ripe bananas. His skin was dark, his eyes were darker. He came from Sioux Falls and his name was Warren Tate.

The truck bustled on southward toward Ghardaya, over the good road the French had laid down in safer times for luxurious P.L.M. buses, and Warren balanced his cheap fiber suitcase on his turban and walked splay-footed into the village. The Arab walk was not hard to mimic—not in such shoes.

Bou Zanna was a cluster of mud-brick huts the color of cocoa. There was a *fonduk*, a corral good for half a dozen dromedaries at most; there was a dusty public square in which the owner of an ambulatory restaurant was broiling chunks of fresh-killed mutton over charcoal.

"Peace," said Warren Tate. "I seek my Great-Uncle, Ahmed ben Ahbes."

"The two-story house at the end of the street," said the restaurateur,

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his arms gloved with blood and flies. "You will see his horses with their heads out of the windows on the ground floor. Beauties."

Ahmed the son of Ahbes was a powerful, dignified man of forty-odd with a square beard, dyed blackest black, and lime-green eyes far handsomer than those of the women who, peering and tittering, gathered behind him.

"Good evening, Uncle," said Warren. "I am Sellim."

"You are expected." Ahmed eyed wives and daughters with no great enthusiasm. "Hens cackle," he said. "Leave your suitcase. We will promenade ourselves." He used the French expression.

They passed some ragged boys playing with a hoop who, touching fingertips to forehead, lip, and breast, saluted them respectfully because Ahmed was a man of substance. Under dusty palms, barefoot women hoisted water from Bou Zanna's only well. Fifty meters farther along they stepped onto open desert. With the sun setting, it was the color of a ripe apricot, every ledge casting its long purple shadow. The clearness of the air was beyond belief; pebbles, cobblestones looked as if they had been scrubbed clean and thrust beneath a magnifying glass; each foot-high shrub threw golden sparks. An expanse of black pumice a mile away shone like a reef of coal.

"Your Arabic is very good," commented Ahmed.

"I learned it at a United States Army language school," replied Warren. "But I've been in Algeria six months, and I have a good ear."

"You're the first American I've seen since tourist days," lamented Ahmed. "I used to rent horses to Americans, and sell them sand roses—*vous savez,* the little crystalline flowers made by the heat of the sun. Tell me, what do your fellow Americans think of this mess of ours?"

"We admire you. Ten, twenty Moslems a day murdered since the cease-fire, and you take it with restraint. These last few months you've won over not only America but the whole free world to your side."

"We're behaving like good Christians, eh?" Ahmed smiled wryly. "*Alors,* De Gaulle behaved honorably, he gave us hope, and we can understand the last few *colons* hanging on—we Arabs don't like change, either."

"You bring me to my reason for visiting you," said Warren. "Since the army blasted Bab-el-Oued last March, the *colons* and their *pieds-noirs,* their gutter riffraff, know they're beaten. But there are still shootings every day. Someone is paying for them, someone is coordinating them—and he isn't a rebel general, and he isn't in Algiers."

Ahmed combed his dyed beard with strong, broad-tipped fingers. His nails were orange-brown with henna. "I must say this is a possibil-

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ity that has not occurred to me."

"He could be in a submarine off your coast, but I doubt it. I think he's here on the desert—near enough to get his commands into the city, but far enough away to keep from being picked up by the army patrols."

"But surely the police know all foreigners. They have to fill out police cards. And if a man came ashore illegally, or slipped across the border, he couldn't go into a village for so much as a handful of dates without having his papers verified."

"Nobody has checked mine," said Warren, "and if an American agent can dye his skin and learn Arabic, so can a Russian. But the police are doing a good job of looking for the dyed Russian. My assignment is to have a look at foreigners with valid reasons for being on the North Sahara. I've checked out Dutchmen drilling water wells, Englishmen looking for oil, Hindus, Syrians—is every Syrian a salesman? Now I want a German in a Volkswagen bus, last seen near Bou Zanna."

"Last seen when I glanced at him two seconds ago," said Ahmed, deadpan but relishing his surprise. He pointed. Out toward the expanse of black pumice, smoke rose straight into the air like a magician's rope. "He sleeps in his automobile and cooks his own food."

"Dog-son-of-a-dog!" exclaimed Warren. "On his passport his name is Herwarts and he's an anthropologist. What's he doing?"

"He has a machine that spins little plastic wheels," replied Ahmed with a shrug. Islam finds machinery unimpressive. "He pays people to sing for him, then he records what they sing on a ribbon."

"Folk music! What a cover, for mass murder!"

"Now that you suggest it, yes," said Ahmed. He cursed.

"It looks as if I'll be here a few days. Can you let me have a room? I'll pay."

"Do not speak of paying, to a patriot," said Ahmed. "Anyhow, you are a relative by marriage, we must remember. I'll just throw out one of the women, preferably an old one."

The clay walls of the tiny room gave off the dry, spicy fragrance of an old Spanish mission church. After prayers toward Mecca and kous-kous, Warren made a quick count of his tools. He had very few along: a spool of fine, insulated wire of unusual tensile strength, a knife, a transistor radio, a longish automatic that fired soft-nosed 9-millimeter cartridges without flash or noise, a dozen boxes of cough drops that might be salesman's samples, a packet of franc notes, and a bottle of anisette that looked and smelled like liquor but that stained skin and hair. Taking only the automatic, he locked away everything else, using not only the visible

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lock on the suitcase but the secret one under the flap.

"Come to the café," said Ahmed. "You must meet my friends."

Hand in hand according to custom, they walked to the café, a mud hut like any other except that its walls were lime-washed blue and it had a few deal tables and crude benches. Formally, under the gasoline lamps swinging from the sapling ceiling, Ahmed presented the sporting set of Bou Zamma: jaunty teenagers with sprigs of mint up one nostril, a cavalryman in Spahi bloomers and leather stirrup cuffs, the tailor, the teacher, an aged farmer blinded by glaucoma. Salutations and compliments were exchanged. So far as Warren could tell, nobody suspected him. Arab families are so ramified that stray relatives arouse no great curiosity. Leaving the others to their gossip, which could have borne the title *Notable Horses of the Past Thousand Years*, he and Ahmed ordered mint tea and took a table by themselves.

"If it's this Germanized Russian," asked Ahmed, "why are you waiting? Why don't we just go out there and blow off his head?"

In spite of himself, Warren laughed. "For one thing," he explained, "I'm not sure he's my man. And even if he is, I want to find out how he's getting his murder orders into Algiers when we're reasonably sure he doesn't have a radio transmitter."

"*Hélas,* you Americans are squeamish. Wait until your population explosion kills a million of you a year from starvation, and you won't put so much value on human life. Let's kill him tonight. If the murders in Algiers stop, we'll know he was the right man."

"I'll work as fast as I can," promised Warren. "Every hour I delay means more bodies on the sidewalks in the city, I know that. Pretty soon you Moslems are going to get sick of it and start rioting again—who could blame you?—and then everything De Gaulle has accomplished will go down the drain, and there'll be dancing in Red Square."

"How can I aid you?"

"The murders are still selective. Unless Herwarts has a detailed timetable, pharmacists on Tuesday, bus drivers on Thursday, something like that. His orders for today's executions had to leave yesterday—leave here, I mean—yesterday or the day before. How is he managing it? Telephone? Telegraph? Homing pigeons? Couriers?"

Ahmed called over a slim boy with a fastidiously trimmed, downturned mustache. "This is Djalil, my sixth son, the postmaster. Djalil, our relation has certain questions," he said.

"Has this Herwarts used the telephone or sent a wire, yesterday or the day before?" Warren asked the boy.

"No."

"Did he send a letter?"

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"Herwarts"—Djalil pronounced the name perfectly, since Arabic is as throaty a language as German—"sends no letters. Only packages, addressed to himself."

"To himself?"

"To his own name, Rue de Joinville, Algiers."

"What sort of packages?"

The young *chef des postes* touched a saucer on the table. "This size."

"Tapes. And tapes are as good as letters," said Warren. "Did one go off yesterday?"

"Yes, and another today."

With the father and son, Warren walked to the *Postes et Telegraphes,* under stars that were like Christmas tree ornaments. He put through a call to Chardin, the *Deuxieme Bureau* chief in the city, reaching him at a restaurant.

"Herwarts is recording native music. There should be a reel of tape in your central Algiers post office right now," he said, in English. "Look for a package about eight centimeters square with his name on it. Play the recording for an expert, will you, and find out if the music is authentic? Then put a cipher man on it."

"Do I let the package go through, afterwards?"

"It's a hell of a choice," said Warren. "If you do, and I'm right, it means more deaths tomorrow. But it may be our best chance of stopping them the day after."

"*D'accord,* it's a nasty choice . . . Our cryptographer is painstaking—this is going to take all night. I'll report to you in the morning," said Chardin. "How do I reach you?"

"Phone me. The postmaster here is loyal—I'm with him now. Call me at eight," directed Warren.

The blasting sunlight of the desert woke him at 5:30. Through an old brass telescope which was Ahmed's most treasured possession other than his horses, he studied the camp out toward the black lava. A lone man moved about a fire—presumably, Herwarts breakfasting.

Warren helped Ahmed to feed and water the gray stallion and the matching mare. Then, a little before 8:00, he strolled to the *Postes et Telegraphes.* The priority call came through promptly.

"The music is authentic, all right," reported Chardin. "The only thing about it that might be fishy is that it's commonplace stuff that was recorded twenty years ago on disks. But maybe your East-German doesn't know that, or maybe he wants it re-recorded in high fidelity. There are three ballads, and one instrumental passage with a nose flute, a reed horn, and a drum. Neither the words nor the notes show recurrent patterns. Our cipher chap insists they're clean."

"Did you go over the reverse side of the tape with a camera?"

"Yes—with ultraviolet. And we also fumed it for invisible inks. Nothing."

"That's bad news."

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"I know. Sorry. We resealed the packet, and it'll be delivered in the mail an hour or so from now. We're watching the carrier to see he doesn't relay it on the way. The concierge at the Rue de Joinville *pension* will put it into Herwarts' room there. But I have more bad news for you. We'v been into the room. There are a dozen tapes on the table, and they don't look as if they've been opened, although of course they may have been. It looks as if Herwarts is simply mailing them for safekeeping. . . . *Allo, allo?"*

"I'm here," Warren assured him. "I'm just beating my brain. I have a feeling we're missing something, don't you?"

"No. Perhaps I'm tired. We'll do anything you say—"

"I don't know what to say, that's the trouble. Well; stake out the Rue de Joinville address, anyhow, will you, Chardin? If a stranger goes in, pick him up and sweat him—he might just still take you to the pistol boys."

"That," said Chardin, "would be a pleasure."

Disappointed, Warren walked back along the dusty street to Ahmed's two-story mansion-stable.

"They say it isn't the tapes, Ahmed. So it has to be a courier."

"Nobody in Bou Zanna would work with the S.A.O.," said Ahmed stiffly. "No man, no boy."

"Knowingly, no. But suppose Herwarts asked someone to do an innocent favor for him in the city—deliver a book, for instance."

Ahmed shook his turbaned head. "In a place this small, everybody would know in five minutes. In any case nobody has gone up to the city. I am positive."

Warren pondered. "Herwarts has his bus. He could drive down the highway a few kilometers, stop a northbound truck, and ask the driver to deliver a message."

"That is much more probable. Many truck drivers are Communist," agreed Ahmed. "He could have an accomplice among them, for that matter. But, once again, you run up against fact. Herwarts has been here a week, and in that time he has not once left the village."

"Has anybody visited *him*?"

"It could be managed at night, I suppose, but only with the greatest difficulty. The dogs would bark . . . No; only our own people who have gone out to sing for him. He pays well."

No matter how he looked at it, it appeared to be a dead end. "I've got to see Herwarts' camp," decided Warren. "Have one of the women teach me some old song he isn't likely to have heard, will you? Does he speak Arabic?"

"No—only French."

"Ride out with me, then, and be my interpreter. If I try French, any European will spot my American accent as soon as I open my big mouth."

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The song was merely a conventional catalogue of teeth like pearls and hair like the midnight sky, a tin-pan version of the Song of Solomon; but the elderly aunt from whom Warren learned it vouched for its antiquity.

"Do not be uneasy; the stallion is a perfect gentleman," said Ahmed, and, rocking comfortably in the high-backed, chairlike saddles of scarlet leather, the two of them rode out. Herwarts welcomed them cordially, offering them coffee. He was a squat creature in shorts, nailed shoes, enormous of chest, cropped of skull, and ugly as a shaved gorilla.

"This is my nephew Sellim, who wishes to sing for your machine," said Ahmed. "He has no French, but I am here to translate."

Herwarts brought out a hand microphone with a long cord. As he did so, Warren got a good look into the little bus. There were two German-made tape recorders—big, battery-driven ones with all the gadgets. But, other than clothing, supplies, and a sleeping bag, there was nothing else of importance in the Volkswagen. There was no radio, not even a receiver. He did glimpse a pair of field glasses.

Warren sang, accepted compliments on his exquisite voice complacently as a native would have done, and took his pay in dirty franc notes. He would have been overjoyed to see new, counterfeit notes, but the intelligence business is never that easy. Herwarts thanked his guests once more, wishing them a pleasant ride. There was no further reason to stay.

Riding back into town they passed the oasis, with its bedraggled palms. Over the flat roof of a hut near it, wisps of white vapor curled in the breeze.

"Ahmed," demanded Warren, "is that a steam bath?"

"Yes. Ours is a good well."

"But why didn't you tell me, man! I need a bath so bad I can taste it! That's a slang phrase."

"How about your dye?"

"It'll stand water. But how about my hair? It's still much too short for a Moslem."

"Wear your turban. Some men do. Just remember to cover your sex with your left hand, never your right," advised the Arab.

The public bath, its interior walls and floor faced with black slate, was as dark as a coal bin. Only now and again could Warren glimpse, through the steam, a shining brown arm or leg. Soaping himself generously for the third time, he called for a boy to douse him with a bucket of warm water. Sitting with his back against the warm wall, he slumped comfortably—and it was the sudden, unanticipated slumping that saved his life.

Steel rang. He felt the sting of stone splinters on his neck. A throwing-knife with a broken point

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slid down across his chest into his lap.

Charging like a halfback, he lunged into the steam. His hands recognized Herwarts' khaki shirt and shorts, even though his eyes could barely make out the man's bulky figure. Hooking with his left, he drove for the midriff with his right. Both punches landed, but Herwarts stamped down with hobnails on his bare foot. The pain was dizzying. Before he could get in another blow—there were shouts, now, and men running—Warren felt himself lifted bodily and slammed against the wall. His head struck stone.

When he came to himself he was on the couch in his room at Ahmed's, alone, with an ache like a skewer through his head. Where, he asked himself angrily, had he gone wrong? What blunder had he made, to give himself away? All he had done was open his mouth to sing a mawkish ballad for the Russian . . . and picturing himself with his mouth open, he groaned.

His teeth, of course! He could not have offered Herwarts a better view of his molars if he had taken them out and handed them to him. And no Arab past the age of twenty has a full set of teeth; no Arab has gold inlays fashioned by an American dentist. All that Herwarts had to do, after such a revealing dental display, was watch the American agent through his field glasses, note that he went into the bath, laugh heartily, and follow.

"Ahmed," called Warren. The skewer jabbed his brain.

"I broke open your suitcase looking for medicines," said Ahmed, coming into the room, "but you have none."

"I'm all right. Did anybody catch him?"

"No, unhappily."

"He's a fast man." Warren sat up, wincing. "He's on his way, now, damn him. He'll either head for Algiers and go underground there, or he'll try to make the border."

"His bus is still out on the desert. His campfire is burning, too. He may be out there, but I didn't want to move against him without your orders."

"He's not out at his camp. He made a try for me and kept right on going," disagreed Warren. "He doesn't want the Volkswagen any longer; he knows I'll wire the police to look for it. No, he's walking, Ahmed. If sunstroke doesn't get him, or sand vipers, he'll walk until he catches a ride on a truck—or on a dromedary. And meanwhile he'll go on ordering killings because I didn't crack his communications system!"

"The killings are continuing, it is true. While you were in the bath, we heard on the radio that *pieds-noirs* broke into a hospital and murdered eight patients in their beds."

"Oh, I'm a great all-round success," said Warren bitterly. "What time is it?"

"Five in the afternoon."

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"Saddle up. We'll have a look at the camp. Maybe in his hurry he's left something behind."

"Take your automatic, my son. I will take the old revolver I used in the *maquis* in the Second World War."

The camp was deserted. The campfire smoldered. Warren knelt beside it. "What's that I smell?"

"Skin," replied Ahmed. "Leather."

Warren raked the embers with a stick. "Here's a piece. Why would he destroy something made of leather, I wonder. A code book, maybe."

"Only Allah knows."

Warren sighed. "Anyhow, you own a Volkswagen. I'll drive it back to town for you; I have to send my wire to Chardin in Algiers."

"As you wish." Ahmed spat into the embers. "I'll ride Dusk. The mare follows well."

The dusk for which the dapple gray stallion was named descended on the North Sahara like a snowfall of gray powder. Stars winked on, and, below them, gasoline and carbide lanterns. His telegram to Chardin on its way, Warren left the Volkswagen parked beside the post office and handed over the keys to Ahmed.

"Don't censure yourself too severely," said the older man. "When you are as old as I, you will know life is just one error after another. We think we think; but that, also, is an error more often then not."

"I need a drink worse than I need food," responded Warren glumly. "Let's go to the café. I'll buy you an anisette."

"First I will lock my new automobile to discourage thieves," said Ahmed. "Take Dusk—I'll be along in a moment."

The brightly lighted café was full of men who crowded round to offer their sympathy. Herwarts had attacked him because they'd had a quarrel, Warren told them, but he doubted very much if they believed the story. He ordered drinks for the house. After a few minutes Ahmed appeared, sending home the horses in care of a small, delighted youngster.

"What will you do now?" asked Ahmed.

"There isn't much I can do," replied Warren realistically. "He knows me. There's no point in my following him, even if I knew where to look."

"You don't think he might still be nearby? We could mount a search party."

"We'd never find him at night. And night is when he'll travel. No, I'll go back to Algiers and ask to be reassigned. I've blown this one, that's all."

The owner of the portable restaurant came in from the street waving smoking lamb chops, and they bought a plateful from him. In a corner, a trio of musicians spread

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mats on the floor and began to play —two flautists and a drummer with a set of small, thin drums not unlike tambourines. The music rippled like water, the ceaseless dream of every desert dweller.

Ahmed patted Warren's hand as though he were a small boy. "If you came of a race as old as mine," he said comfortingly, "you would know that the one thing man can count on is man's stupidity. Herwarts, too, will do something stupid, attend to my words."

"Not Herwarts. No such luck."

Smiling mischievously, the Arab stroked his black beard. "Would you care to wager your magnificent automatic," he inquired, "against my poor old black-powder pistol?"

"You've got yourself a bet, Great-Uncle."

"My bet," said Ahmed, "is that Comrade Herwarts is still in Bou Zanna. As you have pointed out, the intelligent thing for him to do was to run. Therefore he is still here. Why? Because he is in panic, and panicky men are even stupider than the rest of us."

"Get together your search party!" exclaimed Warren. He leaped to his feet. "Let's go."

"There is no need," murmured Ahmed, gently waving him down. "He will deliver himself to us, believe me. It is all arranged. Another anisette?"

"Ahmed, you realize how important this is. If—"

"Tranquilize thyself."

The music changed. The rhythm became staccato, the flutes quickened their pace, and Warren felt his pulse respond. "*Wah'shah'lah,* get hot," someone cried. Several of the younger men, stretching scarves along their extended arms in simulation of the long flintlocks their great-grandfathers had carried into war, formed a ring and whirled into a crouching, hopping dance. The drummer waved a small drum high over his head, his fingers tapping it so fast they became a blur.

"The best jazz drummer in the United States couldn't do that," marveled Warren. "He's syncopating the beats, too. Why, it's impossible!"

"He smokes hemp to heighten his sense of rhythm," said Ahmed. "They all do. They tighten the leather of the drum over a fire."

"The leather—" Warren frowned into his drink. He looked up. "The piece of leather we found in Herwarts' campfire was what was left of a drum, Ahmed. Now I know how Herwarts sends his messages. He taps them out on a drum in ordinary Continental code, at high speed, as an accompaniment to the instrumental music he records. Dubbing, recording engineers call it. All that his accomplice in Algiers has to do is play back the tape at low speed, decode, and reseal the package. The accomplice is somebody living in the *pension* on the Rue de Joinville."

"Technology," said Ahmed, "is

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beyond my poor understanding. Nevertheless, I must congratulate you."

"I must phone—"

From somewhere not too far off came the crash of an explosion.

"Ahmed—" began Warren sternly.

"I found your detonators when I forced your suitcase," confessed Ahmed, with a little shrug of apology. "They led me to examine your red and green cough drops. We used something similar in the Second World War, although our explosive was more like a jelly. I felt sure Comrade Herwarts would try after all to escape in his Volkswagen, parked so conveniently, so I left the keys in it for him."

Warren shook his head. "You've lost an automobile, Great-Uncle," he said.

"And a post office too, I rather imagine," replied Ahmed, deadpan. "But, on the other hand, I have just won a superb automatic with a silencer, which will be something far more useful to me in my small affairs."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **RICHARD CURTIS**

TITLE: ***Turn and Turnabout***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A tale of blackmail, and how, like murder, it can become "a fine art," and how its pursuit can become a most dangerous game.*

HUGO LIPPERT WAS FINISHING THE last page of his report when the receptionist buzzed him. Frowning, he pushed the intercom button. "I told you I wasn't to be disturbed."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lippert," came the tinny voice, "but there's a Mr. Reid here to see you and he says it's most important."

"Reid? Never heard of him. Did he say what he wants?"

"No, sir. But he said you would want to see him if you knew."

"What kind of nonsense . . . ? Very well, give me a few minutes and then send him in."

Hugo's frown deepened as he returned to his typewriter. At first he felt only simple annoyance at the interruption. He was preparing an important study of employee-management relations for the Brinker Company, and he was counting on his conclusions and recommendations to draw Mr. Brinker's approval—plus a promotion and raise.

He typed a paragraph, then stopped suddenly, gripped by an anxiety sharper than simple annoyance. His mind grappled with the name of Reid. No, it still rang no bell. But the contents of the man's message struck a sour note indeed. No one with legitimate business would announce himself quite that way.

Hugo's stomach tightened. He had good reason to fear a stranger whose calling card was urgent but unspecified business. He made a quick decision: it would be safer to remain curious than to see Reid.

He was reaching for the intercom when the door opened.

The receptionist admitted a

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slight, pale man wearing a black business suit and dark glasses The knot in Hugo's gut hardened. The sound of the door shutting was like the clank of a prison gate—a sound with which he was all too familiar.

There was something familiar in Reid's voice as he said, "Hello, Leighton."

The knot became an agonizing cramp. "The name is Lippert," he said, sensing immediately that pretense was futile.

"I'm terribly sorry," the small man said in an ingratiating voice that was not sorry at all, "but there seems to be some confusion over names. I thought your name was Hugo Leighton, and that mine"—he removed his dark glasses—"was Alex Rivers. Please accept my apologies."

"Rivers!"

"Ah, then perhaps I was right after all."

Hugo gaped. His hands began to tremble.

"You look upset," Rivers said with a satisfied smile. "Suppose I help us both to your liquor. I'm sure it's an excellent brand. You are, after all, a very successful executive."

The visitor went to a cabinet by the window and raised a crystal decanter of scotch. After fixing two drinks he pulled the drapes aside and peered out of the picture window. "An admirable view of the city. Quite appropriate for Assistant Manager. You've done well for yourself, Hugo." He crossed to the desk and placed Hugo's drink on it. "I guess a toast to your health is in order, since you've suddenly become very pale."

"What do you want here?"

Rivers sipped his drink and emitted a pleasurable sigh. "I merely wanted to see how effectively you've managed to put your past behind you."

"Very effectively, thank you—until you showed up. And I intend to go on that way, so if you're satisfied I'd like you to leave."

Rivers clucked. "That's most inhospitable of you, Hugo. But if that is your wish I'll go—as soon as we've completed our little transaction."

Hugo took a deep swallow of scotch but his nerves continued to throb. "Transaction? I have no business with you, Rivers—none at all."

"I'm afraid that's not quite accurate, but I suppose three years in prison and four years out have dulled your memory. So let me refresh it, my dear Hugo. Eight years ago you somehow learned that I had been in jail for fraud . . . Is it coming back to you? Then you'll no doubt remember collecting certain damning evidence on my case and threatening to show it to the company for which I was then working. It didn't matter that I had gone straight and was making a new and good life for myself. You knew I had a position to maintain

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and that the disclosure of my past would ruin me."

"That's all over now."

"Yes, but let me go on. You offered to turn the evidence over to me for five thousand dollars. Remember? Of course you do—and that will make you recall that after giving me the evidence, you later showed me a *duplicate* set of the papers. And when I paid you three thousand dollars for the duplicates, you then produced a third set, which you promised was positively the last, and you offered it to me for two thousand more. Ah, I see that you do remember."

"Of course I remember, but you seem to be forgetting the rest of the story—that you invited the police to witness the third exchange."

"So I did. Funny, isn't it, how details escape one after such a long time?"

"Yes, very funny. But I didn't find three years in prison funny."

"I don't imagine you did. Nor did I find the reduction of my bank balance by eight thousand dollars very funny either. We're both singularly lacking in humor, aren't we?"

"Well, to use a shopworn phrase, I paid my debt to society."

"Yes, you did. And I was pleased, to use another cliché, to see justice triumph. However, Hugo, whatever you paid to society, your debt to me still remains on the books. I'm afraid I found your imprisonment a small consolation for the money you extorted from me and for what followed the public release of that evidence."

Hugo looked solemnly into his glass. "So you've come to collect."

"As Stephen Crane once put it, 'Your towering wisdom displaces the stars.'"

"You're wasting your time, Rivers. I spent that money long before I ever went to prison. You know that."

"Let's not quibble. I don't have to have the exact same money. Any substitute in an equal amount will do just as well."

Pulling himself up sharply, Hugo said, "The answer is no. And you'd better get out of here before I call the police."

Rivers' expression did not change. He leaned comfortably against the bookshelves opposite Hugo's desk, his sardonic smile holding fast. "I wouldn't do that until you've heard my proposition."

Hugo came around from behind his desk and earnestly confronted the little man. "I have no intention of listening to it. Let me tell you something, buddy. My prison release is my receipt. It means 'paid in full.' I am not legally bound to repay you, do you understand? And I'm not going to."

Rivers uttered a bored sigh "Hugo, Hugo, I'm well aware of the law. Don't you think that if there were legal recourse to recovering my money I would use it? No, I'm thinking of your moral ob-

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ligation, the compensation you owe me for the acute humiliation, the loss of my social position, my prestige, and finally my wife, who divorced me shortly after the scandal broke."

"I said the answer is no."

Rivers nodded complacently and looked around the room again. "As I noted before, you're doing extremely well here. You have a respectable position at, I would imagine, a respectable salary. What do you suppose would happen if your employer were to learn of your past?"

A smile, almost a grin of defiance, spread across Hugo's face. He began to tremble again, but this time because he knew he held the winning card. "I'm afraid you're out of luck, Rivers. To protect myself against the very thing that happened to you, I told Mr. Brinker who I was and what I had done. I told him the day I took the job, and it was Mr. Brinker's own suggestion that I change my name. He agreed to take a chance on me and his faith has been justified. So I can assure you, Rivers, that Mr. Brinker would stand behind me if you tried to bring my past to light. Now," he said, crossing his arms confidently, "if you're not out of here in the next . . ."

"Come now," Rivers said still supremely composed, "you don't really expect the minds of all extortioners to run in the same shallow rut as yours, do you?"

"You haven't got a thing on me."

"Don't be so sure. I have made full allowance for the possibility that your past is no secret to Brinker. Therefore"—he reached into his pocket and produced some papers —"I have an alternative which I think is far more interesting. Have a look at these."

Warily Hugo took the documents from him. His eyebrows shot up.

Rivers watched him with shrewd, cool eyes. "Look familiar?"

"Of course. Copies of the evidence I used to blackmail you."

"Yes. And now for the purpose of my call. If I were to show these papers to the police and tell them you were using them to blackmail me again, which of us do you think they would believe?"

Hugo fell back against his desk as if stricken. "You wouldn't!"

"My dear Hugo, would I go to all this trouble if I had no intention of carrying out my threat?" Rivers' manner had given way to grim, cruel resolution. "For seven years I have borne the indignity. You would think that people would forget scandal after seven years, wouldn't you, Hugo? But they don't. They still laugh behind my back on the rare occasions when I appear in public. And when I meet new people they scratch their heads until they finally place my name, and then they say with a sneer, 'Oh, yes, now I remember.' It's gotten so that I hardly ever leave my

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home any more. No, Hugo, people don't forget, and neither do I, and now neither will you."

"You're mad, Rivers. Do you think the police will believe that after five successful, honest years I would return to the life of a petty blackmailer?"

"Petty!" It was the closest Rivers had come to losing control. Then his features relaxed again. "We'll let your choice of words pass. Yes, the police would believe it. I would tell them that you have been nursing a grudge against me ever since I put you in jail, and they'll quickly see that you're using your respectable façade only as a front for blackmail. So I ask you again, Hugo, to whom will they listen—a one-time extortioner or his one-time victim?"

Hugo sank into his chair. "What —what are your terms?"

The triumphant smile returned to Rivers' face. "You are a very reasonable man. My terms are reasonable too. I want ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand! I have nowhere near that much!"

"That's no concern of mine. My conditions are five thousand tomorrow—I will phone and tell you where to meet me—and five hundred a month for the next ten months. Unless, of course, you can obtain the second five thousand in a lump sum earlier."

"Rivers, don't do this to me—you'll break me."

"Will I? Now, that seems such a shame, doesn't it? Just when you were beginning to enjoy your success, too. How tongues will wag. Oh, well, such is the nature of fate —one man's gain is another's loss." He put on his dark glasses and moved to the door.

"Rivers." The little man stopped. "You'll give me *all* the evidence when I'm paid up?"

"That's the bargain."

"How would I be sure you aren't keeping duplicates, the same way . . ." He swallowed his words.

"The same way you did? You'll just have to believe me . . . I'll see you tomorrow, Hugo. And let me strongly advise you against pulling any kind of fast one. I have spent years thinking about this, and I guarantee there is no way out which will not backfire on *you*."

Rivers smiled once more and was gone, leaving Hugo staring at the door.

That night was only the first of many sleepless ones for Hugo Lippert, nor was it by any means the worst of them. Time and again he reviewed the situation, turning each aspect of it over and over in his mind in the desperate hope it would reveal something Rivers had overlooked, prodding and probing to find some way to avoid paying a sum which would certainly ruin him.

He could go to the police with this fantastic story, but Rivers was dead-right on that score—they would only laugh in his face if not

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end him right back to prison.

He could try to locate the evidence and steal it, but Rivers was certainly too smart to leave the papers in a readily accessible place. No doubt they were locked in a safe-deposit box or hidden somewhere absurdly difficult to locate. And, of course, even if he did get hold of them, Rivers could undoubtedly obtain more copies. Hugo knew all too well that when a blackmailer says "That's all," he merely means "That's all for now."

He could call Rivers' bluff, hoping the man would not risk scandal again. But that would be futile, because as Rivers had implied, scandal meant nothing to him any more.

So all the possibilities were exhausted. Until he could find an angle, there was no way to get out of making the initial payment of $5000—which represented all but six hundred dollars of Hugo's savings. If he worked something out he might be able to upset Rivers' plan before next month, when the first $500 installment would be due. Possibly he could even come up with something that would enable him to get his five thousand back. But for now, there was no way out.

Oh, yes, he did have one other choice—to kill Rivers. But for obvious reasons he set this aside—to be considered only as a last resort.

The following morning he painfully turned over $5000 to the smiling Rivers, who told him he would be calling on him again in one month.

The moment Rivers was out of sight, Hugo's mind began to thrash with the problem again—and so it was an hour, a day, a week later. The weeks turned into months—but no solution presented itself. His financial reserves were soon wiped out and he began to borrow, first from the bank, then from his friends.

He was becoming badly run down with worry; his work suffered and he was constantly hungry due to skimping and sometimes skipping meals; he had to walk everywhere he went, saving money on fares, and he was so exhausted at the end of each day that he could no longer see the situation in its clear proportions.

Rivers was simply bleeding him dry. The only spark of light in the whole dismal affair was that it would come to an end in the tenth month. So it was a humble, sallow beaten Hugo Lippert who, ten months after a certain Mr. Reid had first called upon him, counted out a bottom-of-the-barrel assortment of twenties, tens, fives, singles, and a big bagful of change, and laid it sullenly but with relief in the hands of a beaming Rivers. "Okay, let's have those papers—all of them" he growled.

Rivers pursed his lips. "I'm afraid I didn't bring them with me."

"You didn't . . ." Hugo grabbed

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Rivers' lapel and hoisted him clear off the ground and against the alley wall where monthly payments were made. "Rivers, we had a bargain and so help me I'll plaster this wall with your brains if you don't fork over that evidence."

Rivers was only slightly agitated. He said, "I expected you wouldn't be reasonable about this, so let me tell you I have a gun in my hand and it's pointing at your heart, and if you don't release me I'll pull the trigger." Hugo caught his breath and eased the man to his feet.

"Where is that stuff?" Hugo demanded as angry, bitter tears welled in his eyes.

"I'm afraid I have to go back on my bargain for another few months. My finances are still not as sound as I'd hoped they would become, with your help. I figure another fifteen hundred should fix me up fine."

"You filthy—"

"Now, now, Hugo, don't forget the gun." He poked it harder against his ribs and Hugo backed off. The snarl frozen on Hugo's face made him look grotesque. His eyes bulged and his clenched fists shook. Rivers stuffed the money into his pocket, sidled out of the alley, and ran to a parked cab, shouting back, "I'll be seeing you next month!"

For Hugo Lippert this was the breaking point. He had no more money and didn't know where to get it. Even if he could raise more, Rivers could carry on this extortion indefinitely. No, he had to put a stop to it, and he had to do it at once. His reasoning powers were gone. He was no longer particular about what he was going to do or how he was going to do it.

He went to a bar, and after downing several stiff doubles and paying for them out of the last few dollars he had to his name, he looked up Rivers' number in a telephone directory. Then he entered a booth, dropped a dime in the slot, and dialed.

"Rivers?"

"Yes?"

"Hugo Lippert."

"Ah, Hugo."

"Listen to me, Rivers. I'll say this just once. I've decided to go to the police with my story. I'll show them my bank book and they'll see my withdrawals. My friends will testify that I've been borrowing dough from them. A blackmailer doesn't take money out of the bank. Even if the police don't believe me right away, they'll look into it. Rivers, I'm going to do everything I can to pin this rap on you."

"You sound desperate, Hugo."

"I don't care what happens to me. And for that matter I don't care what happens to you."

"What are you proposing?"

"I'm not proposing anything. I'm telling you what *you're* going to do. You're going to come down to the alley where we meet and you're

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going to bring me ten grand. I'll be watching you, so keep your hands well away from your body. I've reached the end of the line, Rivers, and if I have to shoot you in broad daylight I will. You'll give me that ten grand *and* the evidence and then we'll consider this deal settled."

"That's not much of a deal—for me."

"Yes, it is, Rivers. Ten grand buys you your life. If you're not here in half an hour I'm going to kill you. It may not be today or tomorrow, but you'll never have another easy moment. Remember, my back is up against the wall—and I don't care what happens to me."

There was a silence.

"Well, what about it?" Hugo demanded.

"What makes you think I have the money?"

"I don't think you'd spend it so soon. And I don't think you'd put it in the bank, since the deposits would confirm my story. I think you still have it in your home."

There was another silence.

"All right. But you won't call the police?"

"Not if you show up. If you're one minute late I will."

"And if they don't believe you?"

"I'm coming after you. Remember, Rivers, I'll have a gun on you, so no funny business."

"I said all right," and Rivers hung up.

Hugo smiled for the first time in nearly a year. He felt a new surge of energy as he rushed home, removed a .45 automatic from its hiding place behind a radiator, and took off for the meeting place. He arrived at the alley about twenty-five minutes after the phone call and took a position that gave him the drop on Rivers.

Three minutes went by. Hugo's hands started shaking and perspiration soaked his clothes.

Another minute went by.

Suddenly he heard the sound of a car door, probably a cab, slamming and a moment later Rivers appeared. He was carrying a medium-sized valise in his left hand, and his right was held well away from his clothing where a gun might be concealed.

Hugo jumped out and shoved the gun in Rivers' ribs. He searched him quickly but found no gun. While running his hand over Rivers' jacket pocket, he heard the crackle of paper. He reached in and drew out a small sheaf of papers. "That's all of them?"

"Yes."

"Open the suitcase."

"Here?"

"Just a crack. I want to see if the dough's inside."

Rivers undid the latches and pulled the two halves apart. The suitcase held a dozen stacks of bills and the bag of change Hugo had given him the last time. "If it's not all there—"

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"It's all there," Rivers said.

Hugo confronted him and said, "I'm tempted to kill you anyway, but I'll forego it. I won't even give myself the small satisfaction of pistol-whipping you. But if I ever see you again I won't be responsible for what I do. Stay here for five minutes."

Hugo backed away, dropped the gun in his pocket as soon as he'd cleared the alley, and started to run. He'd run five steps when he saw three armed plainclothesmen facing him. He turned and saw two uniformed cops training their guns on him. "Hold it right there," one of them shouted. The five men closed in so quickly he didn't have a chance. They disarmed him, removed the papers from his pocket, and took the suitcase.

"Let me explain."

"You'll have plenty of time to explain."

"This is my money. *My* money."

Rivers dashed out of the alley and joined them. One of the detectives said, "That was fast thinking, calling us like that, Mr. Rivers. Good old Hugo Leighton, up to his old tricks again."

"Yes," Rivers said. "And just as before, he didn't even turn over the goods. He was going to blackmail me all over again. I trust you found the evidence on him?"

"Yes, here it is—Exhibit A." The detective looked at Hugo. "What kind of trouble were you in, Hugo. I thought you'd gone straight. What'd you need the money for?"

"It's *my* money." Hugo was whimpering.

"I don't exactly know," Rivers said, "but he told me it was something big, and that he'd borrowed a lot of money for it and still needed more, and that's when he started in on me. I'm sure if you check his bank account and ask his friends, you'll find that he exhausted all his funds for this scheme of his, whatever it is."

"Well, here's your money back," the detective said. "We'll have to keep the papers for evidence, but don't worry. We'll keep the matter quiet this time."

"I'd appreciate that. I've managed to build up a good reputation and I wouldn't want to see it broken again the same way as before."

"It's *my* money," Hugo croaked.

"Sure it is," the detective said. "Just as you say, Hugo."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 251st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . "Vengeance Is Mine" is an authentic piece of regional Americana, with the smack of plain, hard truth about plain, down-to-earth people—a kind of story that, we regret, has almost disappeared from the mainstream of American "local color" and purely American writing . . .

The author is in her thirties and has five children. She is a Registered Nurse, and at the time she wrote her "first story" she was specializing in Orthopedic Nursing at the Campbell Clinic in Memphis, Tennessee. We'll bet that Mrs. Wigginton has some fine "nursing" stories in her!

VENGEANCE IS MINE . . .

by LEATRICE WIGGINTON

I REMEMBER THE NIGHT PAW GOT killed. I was just eight at the time, just a little twerp. But I remember it like it was just yesterday.

First there was the way Maw's face turned white when Ol' Nick come a-loping into the barn lot with the saddle empty. Ned said, "Aw, shecks, Ol' Nick's throwed Paw and run away." But Maw said, "Paw's been riding Ol' Nick to town every Saturday for nigh on ten years now, and he ain't never offered to throw him before. He's getting too old for that kind o' foolishness."

Then she turned to me. "Coley," she says, "go fetch Mr. Cunningham."

Mr. Cunningham was our neighbor on the north. His place was about two-thirds of a mile up the road, and him and Paw got on together right well. But then everybody got on with Paw.

Well, I run as fast as I could, one reason being it was getting dark and I was sorta scared. And then too I was worried about Paw. I didn't like the way Maw had looked when Ol' Nick come a-loping in.

Mr. Cunningham come home with me straight aways, and when Maw told him he looked sorta funny too. But he just says to Maw, "Don't worry, Mrs. Reeder, something probably just scared Ol' Nick,

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and made him buck. You can't tell about these horses no matter how old they are—ornery critters they be some time. Why, Sam will come walking in after while, like as not, and mad as an old wet hen he'll be too." He chuckled, then added, "I'll fetch my boys, and we'll saddle the horses and go out to meet Sam. I guess he wouldn't mind a ride in. Ol' Nick most likely throwed him in the bottom. But it could have been anywheres between here and town."

Town was a good ten miles through the bottom and then over the Hatchie Hills. Well, Mr. Cunningham let on to Maw as how he wasn't one bit worried, but I didn't like the way he looked neither. "I'd be much obliged if you would, Mr. Cunningham," Maw told him. "I just don't like the looks of it one bit."

Ned and Little Sam—them was my two older brothers—'lowed as how they'd saddle up and ride in with Mr. Cunningham. "I'll ride Ol' Nick," Little Sam said. "If anybody knows where Paw is that ol' cuss ought to."

Being the littlest one, of course I got left at home with Maw. But Maw didn't make me go to bed at eight like she allus did—in fact, she didn't make me go to bed at all.

It was fall of the year, and when it began to turn cool in the night she built up a little fire for us to set by. She just sat there tight-lipped, looking in the fire and jumping every time she heard a little noise. I meant to stay awake until the boys and Mr. Cunningham come back with some word of Paw. But when they hadn't got back by three o'clock in the morning I fell asleep in my chair. Maw just let me sleep there, didn't wake me up and make me go to bed, like she would have if she hadn't been worried about Paw.

Well, it was broad-open daylight when the boys and Mr. Cunningham got back. Me and Maw had already started the milking and feeding—you know how it is on the farm. Come life or death or sleet or snow, the stock gotta be fed and cared for. But they brought somebody else with them too—Preacher Grantham—and it was he what broke the news to Maw.

They found Paw all right in the bottom. His head had been bashed in with something, probably a gunstock, the preacher said.

This being cotton-selling time, Paw shoulda had a heap of money in his pocket—but they didn't find nary a dime. His pockets was empty. So the Reverend Grantham said he figgered it was jest plain robbery. Somebody had most likely watched Paw sell the cotton crop and then followed him from town into the bottom, bashed his head in, and took all the money.

Maw never even cried when they told her, jest set her lips a little tighter. And when I set up a howl, she said, "Hush, Coley, yore Paw

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wouldn't want no carrying on." But she didn't say it sharp-like, though.

I heerd Ned and Little Sam talking while they was taking the gear off the horses. And accordin' to them it was really Ol' Nick what showed 'em where Paw was. "We'd a never found him till daylight, out in that bottom and off the wagon trail like he was," Ned said. "But Ol' Nick, he knowed where he was, so he starts to snorting as soon as we hit the bottom, and when he got close to the place where Paw was, he jest stopped and started rarin' and pitchin' to beat the devil. It was all we could do to keep him from hightailing it home again."

So they knowed where to look for Paw. But even then they had a whale of a time finding him. I knowed what they meaned too, 'cause that bottom was full of bushes and briars, till you couldn't see a thing at six feet.

Now we ain't got much Law in our part of the country. 'Course we 'lect us a sheriff every four years, but he always has to buy so many votes he has to get his money back some way, and make him a pile to boot, 'cause he can't run agin. The only way to do this is to let the bootleggers sell wide-open and make them pay him off. Well, that takes up a heap of time, and a little thing like murder—well, he jest ain't got much time for. 'Cause its like I heered him say, "We all gotta go sometime."

But he come to see Maw though, and looking mighty important he was too. In that big black shiny car with *Sheriff's Patrol* in big red letters on the side. I remember thinking if he had waited till the rainy season set in, he'd never have made it on the trail. This all happened twenty years ago and we didn't have no roads fitten for cars, 'cause we didn't need 'em. Everybody went in a wagon or on horseback.

Well, after I stared at the car a while I went in where the Sheriff was talking to Maw. And whut he was saying made my hackles rise. It was a long story, but whut it biled down to was this. Paw had a big sack o' groceries with him and they was scattered over twelve or fifteen feet in the bottom, and amongst them groceries was a half-full quart fruit jar of white corn likker. Whut's more, Paw smelled like a whiskey still, the Sheriff said.

It was the fust time Maw had really showed her spunk since she found out about Paw. "My Sam ain't took a drink o' hard likker in the twenty years we been married. He was a good church-going man, he was. And I'll not have nobody saying he died drunk."

"I'm jest a-telling you whut we found, Miz Reeder," the Sheriff whined. "I'm not saying—"

"I'll not have ye saying it either, Lloyd Jackson," Maw cut in. "Jest remember that."

I sure was glad Maw told him off. I'd have loved to do it, but he

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paid no more attention to Maw than he would have to me.

After the Sheriff left, Maw said, more to herself than to me, "It ain't enough they had to kill him, they gotta take his good name too."

And for the first time I thought Maw was going to cry. So's I went to her and put my arm around her and I says, "Don't you worry none, Maw. I'll find out who kilt Paw and I'll fix him good."

But at that Maw braced up again. "Don't ever say that again, Coley Reeder," Maw says. "Remember whut your Paw always said: 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' 'Vengeance is mine, and I will repay.' That's whut the Good Book says. And yore Paw would tan your hide if he heered you talking about fixing somebody good."

Well, I didn't say a word, 'cause you jest don't sass your Maw. But I remember thinking, "How come the Good Lord let somebody take vengeance on Paw?"

Well, not long after that they come bringing Paw home, and of course the neighbors poured in. And we buried him next day, real decent-like. And mighty purty he looked too in his Sunday suit, with a necktie. And they had fixed his head where it didn't look like it had been bashed in at all.

After it was all over and we had changed out of our Sunday best, I walked out in the barn lot. And like always, ol' Nick come a-running to me and held his head down for me to scratch behind his ears. I scratched him a while and then I hugged his neck and I says, "Nick, if you could jest talk. You could tell us who killed Paw and who wanted to blacken his good name besides."

And then I jest buried my face in his neck and let the tears come, and they dang nigh choked me, they come so hard. All this time I had been trying to act like a man, fer Maw's sake. But now I don't mind telling you I felt like a two-year-old young un.

Right after this, things really begin to happen. All this time ol' Nick had been as good as gold, just like he always been. But one day me and Maw and the boys was in the lot and up walked Matt Weaver. Now, Matt was a bootlegger of the worst sort. Not only did he make and sell, but I had heered the neighbor-men talk, and they said his likker was rotten. "That stuff will porson you"—that's whut they said.

About a year ago Paw had found Matt's still on his land, and Paw didn't hold with that sort of stuff. So he didn't go to the Law or nothing like that—wouldn't have done no good anyway, 'cause Matt was paying off like all the other 'shiners and bootleggers. But Paw knowed whose it was, so he went straight to Matt and told him plain as anything that he couldn't stop him makin' likker if he was so amind to, but he'd not have it on his property.

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Well, Matt called Paw a dirty name. And Paw hit him with his fist, right smack in the mouth. Now Paw weren't a violent man, far from it. And he said later that he didn't hit Matt fer calling him the name—he hit him for using such dirty language in front of a lady. You see, Mrs. Weaver was there and heard it all and Paw always said a man didn't have no right to cuss in front of a woman, not even his own wife.

Well, that was the last of that, 'cause Matt was really a coward, and when Paw knocked him down that took the wind out of his sails, right then.

So here he was right in our own lot with them same old filthy clothes and that old floppy hat he always wore. He never looked like he'd had a haircut fer a year or so, and his teeth and most of his chin was always stained with tobacco juice. As fer his eyes, well, I really couldn't say whut color they was 'cause he allus kept 'em half closed and he never looked at you straight enough for you to tell.

Well, me and Ned and Little Sam, we didn't like it nary bit about him coming round here knowing how Paw weren't a violent man, far spoke real perlite-like and asked about his missus. He jest mumbled something nobody could understand and then got right down to business. He said he figgered as how Paw was dead and him losing the cotton money and all, Maw and us boys would have to sell the place. Well, he was ready to buy it and take it off Maw's hands. 'Course he wanted to buy it reasonable-like, he said.

Everybody knew Paw had the best farm in them hills, not to mention the bottom land he owned. And you could jest tell Matt was figgerin' to get it at about half whut it was worth.

So Maw jest says, "Thank ye kindly, Mr. Weaver, but we've still got the calf crop fer this year, and mighty round and purty they look too. And then we're figgerin' on making more corn than we can use ourselves and that'll bring a little extra money. So I reckon we'll hold on to the place long as we can."

Matt looked real put-out at that and he says smart-like, "This place is too big fer a woman, and a couple o' boys whut ain't dry behind the ears yet."

That's whut he says, just leaving me plumb out, mind you!

Well, I was thinking I couldn't stand it no more and was about to say somethin' when ol' Nick saved me the trouble. He had been down to the pond to drink and nobody was paying him no mind when he came back in the lot.

Well, you'd a thought he smelled Matt before he could see him. 'Cause no sooner did he hit that lot than he snorted a couple a times and started right towards him, pawing the ground as he come. Matt jumped the fence to get away

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from him, swearing all the time. If Paw had been there he'd a lost a few more teeth, let me tell you. And I mean he kept a-going when he hit the ground on the other side too, and he hollered back over his shoulder, "You better get rid o' that critter afore he kills somebody. Like as not it was him whut done your man in," he says.

Well, I couldn't hardly keep back the giggles to save my soul. But Maw jest stood there with her hand to her throat, and finally she says, "Well, I never . . . What on earth's come over ol' Nick?"

After that, Matt told all over the country that it was really ol' Nick whut bashed Paw's head in. But of course nobody believed him, 'cause Nick couldn't have stole the money, now, could he?

It weren't more than a week later that somebody poisoned the cattle. We was pullin' corn then and at quittin' time I allus went by the pasture to drive up the milk cows. Well, this evening I heered 'em lowing afore I got in sight. And they was really a pitiful sight, all of them lowing and bellowing whut was still able. Some of the calves was already dead. Them that wasn't was frothing at the mouth so's you could tell they weren't long fer this world.

Well, I run back and fetched Maw and the boys. Maw said right off she guessed it was cholera and told Little Sam to saddle up and go git Mr. Cunningham, who had been looking out after us as best he could since Paw died, and he come right on without his supper. By then it was getting good dark and he had to work by his carbide hunting light. But work he did for the longest time. It didn't do no good though, 'cause by midnight they was every one dead as a hammer. And then was when he told us.

"This ain't no cholera, Miz Reeder," he says. "Them cattle was porsoned."

"Well, I reckon with frost coming on and killing off the grass, they jest et some kind of porsoned weed," Maw 'lowed.

But Mr. Cunningham jest shook his head and said, "They ain't enough porsoned weeds growing in this part of the country fer to kill off that many cattle, ma'm. Somebody fed them cattle porson."

But Maw jest couldn't believe it. "Surely ain't nobody mean enough to do that aroun' here."

We didn't have the heart to remind whut somebody aroun' here had done to Paw.

Well, it looked like we was in fer it sure 'nough now. The cotton money was gone. And now the cattle was gone, we didn't have a milk cow left. And nobody offered to lend us one, like they usually did when a neighbor was left without. I knowed why. They was afeered to on account of whut had happened to ourn. If they lent us one somebody might poison it too. So we jest done without milk.

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Well, we went on a-working like always and in another two weeks we had the corn all pulled. Maw said that night it was a good thing too, 'cause it was beginning to be cold as everything. I could tell Maw was a-worrying lately, and you could almost see her hair turning grayer. But she never said a thing.

Then sometime past midnight that very night I woke up, and whut woke me was ol' Nick a-snorting and a-pawing at the stable door. I jumped up and got my britches on, but Maw and both the big boys was up ahead o' me. And as soon as we walked out the back door we saw it. The corn crib was on fire. The blaze was a-lapping up halfway to the sky. They weren't no need to try to put it out. And they weren't no need to fetch none o' the neighbors. The corn crib sure was a goner.

All this time ol' Nick was a-snorting and a-pawing at the stable door. "He's afeered o' the fire, pore thing," Maw says. "Go turn him out, Coley, and let him go to the pasture."

Well, I sure couldn't blame him fer being scared, 'cause nothing is more eerie-looking than a big fire in the middle o' the night. Special when it means as much to you as that crib o' corn did to us. But I turned ol' Nick out and he done the darnedest thing. Instead o' headin' fer the pasture like he was supposed to, he come straight towards that crib, and then he circled it and a sycamore thicket not more than fifty yards from where we was standing. He was a-snorting and a-pawing every step of the way.

Then was when we heerd the scream.

Now if I live to be a hunderd and twenty I'll never forget that scream. We could tell right off it was human and yet it sounded animal-like. And let me tell you it would make the hair rise on the back of your neck.

Ol' Nick would neigh and snort and then we'd hear his hoofs come down onto something. And all this time the screaming went on and on. It was horrible.

Well, Maw grabbed up the lantern and run towards the thicket and all three of us boys followed. But the screaming stopped just 'fore we got there, and it was too late anyways, 'cause Matt Weaver was dead with his head bashed in jest like Paw's was. And there set his kerosene can on the ground, where he had emptied it onto our corn crib.

Well, Miz Weaver told the rest. Seemed like when she found out Matt was dead, she couldn't get done talking. She said she was afeered to talk before 'cause Matt told her he would kill her if she breathed airy word. And ever'body that knowed Matt Weaver said they didn't doubt that one bit.

She said as how Matt had hated Paw ever since Paw made him get his whiskey still off the place and

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swore he'd git him sooner or later. He jest bided his time until the day he saw Paw sell his cotton and start home across the bottom. Then he stopped Paw and told him he wanted to talk with him.

Well, Paw weren't one bit skeered o' him and turned his back to tie ol' Nick up. That's when Matt hit him in the back o' the head.

Well, after he beat Paw to death, he thought how funny it would be if they found Paw smelling like whiskey and with more whiskey on him. Then he remembered the money. He hadn't meant to rob Paw at first, but Paw had nigh on to three hundred dollars in his jeans and that was just too much to leave. Miz Weaver said he really crowed over that money and bragged how he was gonna use Paw's own money to buy Paw's farm from his widow and kids. He was so mad when Maw wouldn't sell the place he swore he'd starve us out. And that's when he decided to poison the cattle and burn up the corn.

Well, Miz Weaver cried and said it was terrible to have to watch him do all that hating and all the time knowing what a good man Paw was. She said she couldn't give Maw and us kids back Paw or the cattle or the corn. But she knew where Matt hid the money he took off Paw and she'd give us every dime o' that. And then she was going back to Tennessee to her folks.

The Sheriff come out after that and told Maw that Miz Weaver could be persecuted fer somethin' after the fact o' murder. I didn't know whut he was talking about, but Maw seemed to and she jest said, "'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' And I think that pore soul has already paid enough for everything she ever done."

They was some in them parts figgered as how the Law ought to come out and shoot ol' Nick. They said once a hoss gets a taste o' blood he's dangerous from that day on. But it's like I said before—the Law didn't have much time fer a little thing like murder, and specially when the murderer was a hoss. So's nothing ever come o' that either, and it's a good thing too, 'cause the Sheriff would have had to kill three boys before he got to ol' Nick.

Well, all this happened over twenty years ago and most ever'body's forgot all about it but me and Maw and the boys. Ol' Nick finally died at the ripe old age of twenty-two, and I'm thankful to say no hoss ever had better treatment right on up until he died. It was jest like Ned said, "Ol' Nick told us two or three times who killed Paw—if we had just had a little common horse sense."

And like Maw said the night Ol' Nick killed Matt, "'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' And if the good Lord wants to use a horse as His instrument, there ain't nothing we can do about it."

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A circus story written by "a man who was there"—the author was a clown with Christy Brothers' Big Five-Ring Wild Animal Show in 1928, their last year on the road, and most of the story, Mr. Lewis tells us, actually happened . . . "La-deez and Gen-tel-men, I now direct your attention to my left where the Rocket Man is about to begin his ascent to the stars . . ."

FALLING STAR

by RICHARD O. LEWIS

LA-DEEZ AND GEN-TEL-MEN, I NOW direct your attention to my left where the Rocket Man—the Rocket Man, Ladies and Gentlemen—is about to begin his ascent to the stars . . ."

As the ringmaster's voice rolled steadily out through the loudspeaker in the Big Top, the lights in the upper part of the tent dimmed and died, battery after battery, until only the ground lights were left. A bright red spot picked up the figure of the Rocket Man standing statue-like beside a ring curb, a plastic space-helmet under one arm. His swarthy face and close-cropped dark hair contrasted sharply with his tight-fitting uniform of silver and gold. Strapped to his back was a small brown packet.

He waited until the ringmaster's voice had echoed away, then made a short bow in the general direction of the reserved seats, put on his helmet, turned, and stepped on the cable of thin steel that slanted steeply upward from its anchor stakes to become lost in the upper darkness of the big tent. He gained his balance with the aid of an upright fan which had been painted to resemble a nose cone.

The lone drummer of the small circus band set up an heroic roll on his snare, the crowd became hushed, and the Rocket Man, clutching the cable firmly with the toes of his heavily stockinged feet, began the slow climb upward.

Bosko, the sad clown, stood near the anchored end of the cable, his white, freshly laundered and starched suit tinged a brilliant pink by the shifting edge of the red spot. He was paying little attention to the man on the wire—it was an old act and he had seen it many times. Long ago, he remembered, it had had different names— The Slide for Life, The Death-Defying Plunge, The Man from Mars, and others. Now, however, due to cer-

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tain advancements in science, the name had been updated.

Back in the old days, of course, the steel cable had been much longer, the Big Top much higher.

Bosko drifted away in a moment of reverie. Back then, even the show of medium size was huge in comparison with the circuses of today. He remembered the Barnes Show and Christy Brothers' Big Five-Ring Wild Animal Show. Christy Brothers! Now, there was a show! A certain Mr. James had directed a large band, and his son, Harry—hardly more than 12 years old—had played cornet. Bosko's own father and mother had had top billing as high-wire artists, and Bosko himself had been practicing diligently.

But that was back in '28. And that year had been the last of everything. A train-and-car collision had brought the world tumbling down. While Bosko lay unconscious in a hospital, his father and mother had been buried, and his own shattered hip ruined any further tight-wire aspirations. After that he had gone along rather aimlessly as a clown, making the kids laugh . . .

A sudden, involuntary gasp went up from the crowd. Bosko didn't look up. He knew what was happening: the Rocket Man had feigned a loss of balance and would thresh the air violently for a few seconds with his great fan before continuing upward.

Smitty, the clown cop, jerked at the bear's short leash several times and elbowed Bosko in the ribs. "This critter's acting up again tonight," he said. "Must be something wrong with him."

Bosko looked at the huge brown bear at Smitty's side. Even on all fours, the animal's shoulders reached to the height of Smitty's hips. The beast was heaving its front quarters from side to side, saliva dripping from its red lips.

"Probably tired of life," said Bosko. "After all, he's probably old enough to be your father."

A rain had muddied the lot before the big tent had gone up that day. Bosko shifted his feet from the muck and let his gaze shift from the bear to the other end of the tent. She was there, as he knew she would be, leaning against a tent pole, waiting. Ella! Her long legs showed white below her blue tights, and her large eyes were gazing upward to the Rocket Man. Her man!

Bosko fought down the sudden surge of emotion that rose within him at the sight of her. Three years ago he had found her, a homeless waif of seventeen, had taken her into his trailer, and fed her. She had stayed on, and in winter quarters that first year he had taught her to ride, to work on the low trapeze, and to do the "iron jaw." There had followed three years of bliss for the lonesome Bosko, and then, four nights ago . . .

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The drum roll came to an abrupt halt. The red spot winked out. All eyes were on the Rocket Man now standing on his small perch in the upper reaches of the tent, his fluorescent uniform scintillating with silver and reddish gold. He hesitated for a moment until he felt the soft insoles of his stockinged feet firmly on the wire, then pressed the ignition switch on his back pack. Instantly, rocket flames spewed out and Roman candles showered the darkness with their white, red, and yellow balls of fires. The Rocket Man, standing gracefully upright on the wire, began his flaming slide, accompanied by a profusion of drum-rolls and rim-shots from the enthusiastic snare drummer.

The slide ended with a resounding crash of cymbals. The Rocket Man leaped from the end of the wire, swept the helmet from his head, and bowed stiffly to the applauding audience as the band struck a solid chord.

He wheeled then to make his exit—and ran squarely into Bosko. A roar of laughter went up from the crowd as the sad-faced clown in starched whites fell flat on his back in the mud. To the audience it was all part of the act.

The upper lights flashed on, the band struck up a lively tune, and from all three rings, girls in multicolored tights—spangled and rhinestoned—began to climb their ropes.

Smitty, holding the bear's leash with one hand, bent over Bosko and got a hold of his arm. "You all right?"

"I—I think so," said Bosko, pulling himself up. "Just shook up a bit, I guess."

"That was no accident!" muttered Smitty. "He did it on purpose! I saw him!"

"Yeah," Bosko muttered, testing his legs. "Okay." He took the leash from Smitty. "Let's go."

The band had gone into a lilting waltz. Half the girls were doing trapeze acts on short, suspended ladders; the others, suspended from cables by their teeth and trailing yards of swirling cloth as they gyrated, were doing the iron jaw butterfly routine.

Bear in tow, Bosko limped to the near end of the reserved seat section. There he began to stagger drunkenly, took a whiskey bottle from an inner pocket, uncorked it, waved it in the air, put it to his lips, and staggered against the bear.

"Up!" he commanded. "Up! Up!"

The bear, weaving restlessly, paid no heed.

Bosko flourished the bottle, took another drink, staggered, gently kicked the bear in the ribs, and jerked the leash.

"Up, Grosso! Up, I say!"

The bear grunted reluctantly and reared up on its hind legs to tower over the diminitive clown in white. Muddy claws reached out, and Bosko handed him the whis-

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key bottle filled with sugared water and got another one from his pocket. Clown and bear drank together and staggered about until Smitty, the cop, descended on them with loud shouts to confiscate the liquor, drub Bosko soundly over the head with a huge "billy" of foam rubber, and send the two along their way—after which he turned his back to the laughing audience, tilted his head back, and took a few nips for himself.

By that time—halfway down the section of reserved seats—Bosko had unearthed two more bottles, and he and El Grosso were going into the drunk pantomime again.

Bosko, clothed in T-shirt and shorts, sat silently in his trailer, staring into nothingness. Hanging behind him was his mud-spattered clown suit. He would have to wash and iron it again. Subconsciously, he heard the music for the after-show concert die out, heard the impersonal hum of voices and starting motors as the crowd began to disperse; then he slowly began to remove the black and white grease paint from his face.

He worked carefully, for his face was lacerated in several places; the flesh over one cheekbone was puffy and red, and one eye was bloodshot and surrounded by an area of blue and yellow discoloration.

"Come in," he said in answer to a knock on the door.

Smitty wore a blue shirt and dungarees. His face, now devoid of make-up, was as sad as the sad face Bosko had just finished removing. The corners of his wide thin mouth drooped, the upper lids of his eyes sagged, and even the hook of his nose had a downward curve of dejection. It was his natural expression.

Bosko got two bottles of beer from the refrigerator, opened them, and set them on the table.

"How's your face,?" asked Smitty, peering near-sightedly.

"It's mending."

"Looks like an elephant stomped on it."

Bosko nodded. "Guess it's my own fault. But when I walked into his trailer and saw them together, things went red. Guess I tried to kill him."

"And you coulda done it, too," Smitty said helpfully, "if you'd been twenty years younger and about seventy pounds heavier."

They drank beer in silence for a while, Smitty drumming the fingers of his left hand on the table, and Bosko thinking back over the fight of four nights ago. He had been no match for the younger and heavier Dryco, the Rocket Man, and Dryco had known it. Instead of kicking Bosko out the door, Dryco had knocked him down, pounded him mercilessly, and had even tried to gouge out an eye. He was vicious, animal-like.

"He's been afraid of something

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ever since," said Smitty, as if following Bosko's line of thought. "He's a frightened man living in a world of hate and distrust. You can see it in his eyes. And I think what he is afraid of is *you!"*

"Me?" Bosko shook his head. "No, I don't think so. I've known for a long time that Ella was going to step out on me . . . She was good company, and we had fun together. But this time she took all her things, so she won't be coming back, and I—well, I don't want her back. It was just that I'd been drinking a bit that night, and I got mad, and . . ."

Bosko, frowning at something he had suddenly remembered, let the sentence die.

"Yes?" Smitty leaned forward eagerly. "You'd been drinking a bit, and you got mad, and . . . ?"

"After I got out of the door and away from him," Bosko went on, "I was madder'n I'd ever been before in my life—or ever want to be again. I thought he had gouged my eye out. And I told him that I'd kill him if it was the last thing I ever did!"

Smitty spread his hands, palms up, on either side of his bottle of beer, and leaned back in his chair. "And there you have it!" he said. "He's afraid of you! He thinks you are going to try to kill him!"

"But that's silly! It's just that I was . . ."

"Sure! You know it, and I know it. But Dryco doesn't know it!"

"But that's all over with now."

"As far as you're concerned, yes—but not as far as Dryco is concerned." Smitty leaned forward again. "Look at it this way: if you had given Dryco the beating he gave you, he'd get even with you if it was the last thing *he* ever did. He thinks *everybody's* like that—and that you're going to try to get revenge!"

Bosko shook his head slowly. "But I hardly believe . . ."

"Then I guess you haven't found out yet that the valves of all four tires on your car and the two on your trailer are missing and that right now you have six very flat tires."

Bosko was about to say, "But that's kid stuff!" when he remembered something. Two days ago, at dawn, when he was getting ready to leave the show lot with the caravan, he had discovered that the bolts of his trailer hitch and its safety chain were loose. It would have been only a matter of a few miles on the highway before the trailer hitch would become disengaged and the trailer would swing crazily behind on five or six feet of chain. The heavy trailer could easily have thrown the car and Bosko into the ditch—or dragged the car into the stream of approaching traffic.

Bosko's cuts, bruises, and injured eye stung and throbbed as a sudden surge of angry blood swept into his face.

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"He intends to drive you off the show," Smitty said.

After the flush of anger had subsided, Bosko got two more bottles of beer and opened them, and they drank in silence.

"Maybe," Smitty said finally, a ray of hope beginning to shine in his sad face, "we could get El Grosso so riled up about something that when Dryco turns to make his exit we can fix it so he runs smack into the critter or stumbles over the leash . . ."

Bosko remembered that during the past few performances he hadn't been quite sure whether El Grosso was going to take the bottle of sugared water in his big paws or Bosko's head instead. "Fine!" he said. "Except that the bear is old and sick, and if he gets riled up any more than he is, he might take one of *us* apart."

"Yeah." Hope ebbed from Smitty's sad face. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Of course not." Bosko tried to grin through bruised lips. "You don't have to handle that critter the way I do."

"I know one thing," Smitty said reflectively. "You're going to have to stop Dryco—good! Or you're going to have to leave the show or get hurt—bad!"

"Maybe he'll cool off in a day or two. If not, I'll try to talk with him. If that won't work, then I can always leave the show."

Smitty jumped up as if he had been struck. "But you can't—you can't do that! I've got a new act for us! Been working on it ever since El Grosso began misbehaving. I've been keeping it as a surprise! I sent a wire to a supply house for some props . . ."

He was leaning halfway across the table in his eagerness, his droopy eyes almost completely open. "We'll have the best humor act on the show—you wait and see! And I thought since—since Ella had gone, one of us could sell his car and trailer and we could both travel together, work as a team . . ."

Bosko gazed thoughtfully at the beer bottle in his hand. Yes, it wouldn't be bad at all—he and Smitty always got along fine together . . . "We'll just have to wait a day or two," he said, "and see how things turn out."

The morning sun was high in the sky before the two men, after two trips in Smitty's car to a service station for new valve cores and tanks of compressed air, were able to make a belated start for the next town, far in the wake of the caravan.

For the next two nights Bosko parked his car and trailer in lighted areas where anyone bent on mischief could be plainly seen, and the show went smoothly except that El Grosso became increasingly difficult to manage.

Smitty spent every spare mo-

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ment sitting in a chair beside his trailer, his hands busy with wire mesh, a bundle of old newspapers, and a huge pot of glue. He whistled as he worked, and it was almost inconceivable that such a merry, lilting tune could issue from such a sad, sad face.

Bosko avoided Dryco during the two days, feeling reasonably sure that time would mend their differences. Yet he was careful to check the trailer hitch each morning and to be on the alert for any other trouble. On the third morning, however, he discovered that he'd been wrong: Dryco had not forgotten.

After his car failed to start, Bosko found that all six spark plugs had been removed during the night.

"Some morning," said the helpful Smitty, "when you try to start your car, you'll find a stick of dynamite under the hood." He shook his head sadly. "He's scared to death of you, and you're going to have to stop him before he stops you!"

After a trip to the service station for new plugs, a second trip became necessary: the rotor from the distributor had also been removed and two wires cut.

During the three-hour drive to the next show town anger burned slow, but deep, in Bosko. On the surface, Dryco's tricks seemed petty, but Bosko knew the purpose behind them. The Management, for good reasons of its own, did not tolerate lateness to a performance, and Bosko would have been late at least three times if it hadn't been for the ever-helpful Smitty and the use of his car. And if these little tricks failed, Dryco was certainly capable of resorting to more drastic measures.

By the time Bosko reached the lot and parked his trailer, his temper had cooled a bit; but he had reached a definite decision. He would see Dryco as soon as possible and try to get things straightened out—one way or another.

His opportunity came an hour before the afternoon performance when he saw Dryco leave his trailer to go to the big tent to inspect his rigging.

Bosko limped hurriedly after him and caught up with him just as he rounded the back of one of the cage trailers.

"Dryco! Just a minute!"

Dryco stiffened instantly; the blood drained from his dark face as he wheeled about, alert.

"This foolishness has gone far enough," Bosko said, trying to keep the anger from rising in his voice. "I just want to tell you that . . ."

Sudden rage replaced the fear in Dryco's face. A frown brought the dark hair of his forehead closer to his thick brows, and his eyes narrowed. He took a quick stride forward. "You're not telling *me!* I'm telling *you!*"

He clutched Bosko by the shirt

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front, then sent him spinning backward. Bosko, totally unprepared for the attack, fell heavily.

Dryco stood over him, eyes glaring. "You be off this show by morning! Or else . . ." There was no mistaking what the "or else" meant as the Rocket Man drew his foot back for a kick.

Bosko would have received another beating, and perhaps a few fractured ribs, if two workmen hadn't happened by at the moment. The workmen didn't interfere, of course—the gulf of class distinction between performers and workmen was too great to be bridged even under such circumstances, and Dryco had top billing. They just stopped to watch, and the Rocket Man, not wanting an audience for this particular performance, swore at them and walked away.

Bosko picked himself up and brushed off the dirt. Anger seethed within him, but there was nothing he could do about it. He knew he was licked. Physically, he was no match for the larger man, and he couldn't imagine himself waiting for Dryco in the dark some night with a tent stake or a knife. Neither could he bring himself to think of tampering with Dryco's gear or rigging.

There was only one solution. Tomorrow morning the show caravan would leave the lot without him . . .

Smitty was waiting at the trailer, happiness and excitement struggling to shine through his sad countenance. On the grass beside him, clothed in an outsized coat with tails, was the torso of a giant.

"Look!" Smitty raised the prop quickly and let it slide down over his head, arms, and shoulders. Instantly, he became a headless giant eight feet tall. "How do you like it?" came his muffled voice.

"Fine," said Bosko. "It looks great." He sat down wearily in a chair beside the trailer. "But you'll have to get someone else to help you with the act. Tonight will be my last show."

Smitty bent forward, relieved himself of the torso, and let it slide to the grass at his feet. Strangely enough, he didn't seem too perturbed concerning Bosko's leaving. "I'll have it all ready by tonight's performance," he said.

The blast of a whistle shrilled out from near the big tent. "Time to get ready," Smitty said as he gazed at the billowing canvas. "Maybe after tonight," he said thoughtfully, "you'll feel better about things. Maybe you'll want to stay on . . ."

The afternoon performance didn't go well for Bosko. He went through his walk-arounds listlessly and automatically, caring little whether anyone laughed at him or not. And the closing bit with El Grosso was a complete failure. The animal simply refused to respond to Bosko's commands. It tossed its

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great head and shoulders in anger, saliva dripping from its jowls and ominous rumblings of protest coming from deep within. The two clowns finally gave up and took the animal back to its cage.

After taking off his make-up, Bosko walked over to Smitty's trailer, knocked, and entered.

The giant's torso was lying on the bed. Suspended from short strings tied to a chair were three grotesque balloon heads. One had the patched eye and scars of a pirate, another exhibited a row of enormous teeth, and the third had an evil face surrounded by a bristling, yellow beard. Smitty finished inflating a fourth with the aid of a small cylinder of helium and then began stuffing them one by one into the torso.

"There's only room in there for four heads besides my own," he said, "and so we make only four stops during the show." He indicated two cardboard cartons on the bed. "I got two gross of heads. Enough to last out the season—if we can get the workmen to retrieve some of them when they tear down at night."

Bosko sat down in the chair. "Maybe we should practice," he suggested.

Smitty shook his head. "No—I can tell you all about it in less than a minute, and we can build it up from there, taking out the bugs as we go along. Anyway, let's keep it as a surprise to everybody tonight."

Holding the huge torso in one arm, he reached inside with the other and forced one of the heads out from the flaps between the shoulders. The transformation of the headless torso into a lifelike caricature was both instantaneous and hilarious. In spite of his depression, Bosko found himself laughing appreciatively at the ridiculous monstrosity.

Smitty's head bobbed up and down in evident pleasure. "Thought you'd like it," he chuckled. "We'll call it Jack the Giant Killer!"

The crowd for the evening performance that night was so large that an extra "blues" section had to be set up to accommodate it. And it was as fully receptive as it was large.

Bosko went through his first walk-around with the same listless disinterest he had shown during the afternoon performance. So far as he was concerned, this would be his last show. He hadn't been able to decide what he would do or where he would go, but that could wait till morning. He hated himself for his cowardice—but there seemed to be no other possible solution. And most of all, he hated to leave Smitty . . .

But before the end of his second walk-around the enthusiasm of the crowd took hold of him and he found himself responding to it. The mood was infectious. The band

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sounded better than it had at any other time thus far in the season, and the performers, receiving generous rounds of applause, were giving their utmost in return. Yes, it was a good night.

During his third bit, when he was going through all the antics in his bag of tricks, Bosko suddenly realized that he was enjoying himself immensely. And with that realization came an equally sudden decision: he would not leave.

And as the evening progressed, the determination grew. He and Smitty would travel together in one of their trailers, work out some more acts together, and Bosko would face up to Dryco and stop him—one way or another . . .

"La-deez and Gen-tel-men, I now direct your attention to my left where the Rocket Man—the Rocket Man, Ladies and Gentlemen—is about to begin his ascent to the stars . . ."

The upper lights began to dim.

Smitty was standing beside one of the "butterflies" a few feet away from Dryco, the prop torso lying at his feet. "That Bosko!" he said to the girl. "He's sure steamed up about something tonight! Acts like he's ready to lick the world!"

He saw Dryco's head turn suddenly, eyes alert, to scan the area. But Bosko was nowhere in sight.

The ringmaster's voice died away and the red spot flashed on. Dryco bowed in three directions, his narrowed eyes searching. Then he stepped on the wire, balanced himself, and the snare drummer began his roll.

Smitty shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other, his eyes traveling from the rear of the tent to Dryco and back again. At the last moment he had sent Bosko back to the trailer for a prop he had left behind. It should only take him two or three minutes . . .

A gasp went up from the crowd, and Smitty knew that Dryco had reached the mid-point on his wire where he feigned his customary loss of balance. In another minute now he would reach the top of the wire.

Smitty's hands began to clench and unclench rapidly as his eyes went again and again to the tent flap at the rear. Bosko would have to return *now!* Everything depended on it . . .

And then he caught sight of the white figure as it emerged from behind the flap and strode forward into the dim glow of the ground lights.

Smitty's gaze shot upward again. Dryco was now within twelve feet of the platform at the upper end of the wire. But he had paused. He was looking down. He had caught sight of Bosko, striding forward. It would be only a matter of seconds . . .

Smitty motioned for Bosko to hurry, and Bosko quickened his pace, the broad blade of the great ax he carried over his shoulder

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glinting like burnished silver in the glow of the lower lights.

It is doubtful if anyone in the audience noticed Bosko as he reached Smitty's side and raised the great ax from his shoulder. The eyes of the crowd were on the Rocket Man. They saw him falter, turn half around, then take two frantic steps upward toward the platform.

Then a murmuring gasp swelled up from the audience as the Rocket Man missed his footing, toppled, dropped his fan, grasped at the wire with both hands—and missed.

The snare drummer, a showman to the last, followed the descent with a rolling crescendo that ended in a mighty crash of cymbals as Dryco's body thudded to the ground.

Workmen rushed forward, picked up Dryco's body, and carried the still figure away. The lights flashed on. The band skipped its customary chord and went into a lively tune, and the girls ran hurriedly toward their ladders and rigging.

"That's our music!" said Smitty. "Let's go!"

He slipped the torso down over his head and shoulders, forced the grotesque pirate head up through the flaps, and hurried toward the near end of the reserved seats, with Bosko in eager pursuit, the gleaming ax raised high.

The sad clown smote the giant a mighty blow, and the giant did a lazy, slow-motion fall. Bosko placed a foot on the shoulder of the giant and thumped his own chest in triumph. "What happened to *him?*" he whispered as he began hacking at the evil head with his ax.

"I told you he was afraid of you," came Smitty's muffled voice. "I guess he thought you were going to cut his cable in two with your ax. Anyway, he won't be with the show any more this season."

The severed pirate head didn't fall to the ground. Instead, it began to float slowly and crazily upward.

The crowd in the reserved seats laughed as Bosko stood in feigned amazement watching the head soar toward the top canvas. And the laughter increased as the giant got slowly to his feet, miraculously sprouted a new head with yellow whiskers, and began running away again.

Near the center of the reserved seats Bosko felled the giant again and began hacking at the head. The ax in his hands weaved about as if it were a serpent being held by the tail. "But I couldn't cut hot butter with this rubber ax," he said. "And you know it!"

"Sure!" said Smitty. "I know it and you know it. But Dryco didn't know it!"

The second head began to soar upward, and even above the laughter of the crowd Bosko was certain he heard a muffled chuckle coming from inside the giant's torso behind him.

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IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

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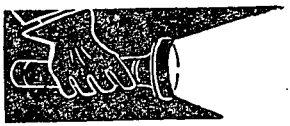

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

It is hard to think of anyone, even Edgar Lustgarten, who has written the legal novel more successfully than Edward Grierson. His REPUTATION FOR A SONG (1953) and THE SECOND MAN (1956) are classics; and now once more in THE MASSINGHAM AFFAIR (Doubleday, $3.95), he illuminates the workings of the law while telling a suspenseful, moving and dexterously plotted story, based on a true miscarriage of justice in the 1890's.

★★★★ **THE LIGHT OF DAY, *by Eric Ambler*** (Knopf, $3.95)

The master of international intrigue adds a sort of scherzo to his symphonies of espionage, with a grand comic thriller of devious deeds in Istanbul.

★★★★ **PRACTISE TO DECEIVE, *by George Bradshaw*** (Harcourt, Brace & World, $3.95)

13 pleasing and clever fictions of criminous coups in the world of the fine arts—off-trail and refreshing.

★★★★ **BLACK SHEEP, WHITE LAMB, *by Dorothy Salisbury Davis*** (Scribner's, $3.50)

The outworn topic of teen-age crime comes vividly to life again in Mrs. Davis' rich warm creation of a community and its people.

★★★ **A NICE GIRL LIKE YOU, *by Richard Wormser*** (Gold Medal s1271, 35¢)

Lt. Andy Bastian of Naranjo Vista, one of America's most promising realistic cops, solves a rape case with precision, insight and restraint.

★★★ **THE MOON-SPINNERS, *by Mary Stewart*** (Mill-Morrow, $4.50)

The best writer of romantic mysteries since du Maurier brings one of her incomparably spirited heroines to love and murder in Crete.

For splendid non-fictional analysis of the law at work, see H. Montgomery Hyde's OSCAR WILDE (Penguin 1857, 85¢), extensively and admirably revised from its 1948 appearance in Notable British Trials. Avram Davidson's CRIMES & CHAOS (Regency RB308, 50¢) studies familiar and unfamiliar criminal cases, plus some notable disasters, with careful research and a fine feeling for period and flavor.

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a new Grandfather story by

LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.
TITLE:	*Have You a Fortune in Your Attic?*
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Grandfather Rastin
LOCALE:	Borgville, Michigan
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Grandfather and the Great Fiddle Mystery . . . Was the old violin, stored in the Peterson attic lo these many years, a genuine Stradivarius? The trouble was, Grandfather knew nothing at all about violins . . .*

IT WAS A SIGHT BORGVILLE HAD NEVer seen before and most likely would never see again, and I almost missed it.

It had been raining hard all morning, and for want of anything else to do I was down in the cellar getting in some target practice with my air rifle. I had a couple of windows open, and when I heard something that sounded like a herd of cows stampeding along the sidewalk, naturally I went to look.

It was Doc Beyers' wife, and she was *running!*

Mrs. Beyers prides herself on being the most sedate woman in Borgville—though as Grandfather says, she really hasn't much choice. There's so much of her to move around that it's only a question of doing it sedately or staying put. She even holds her laughs down to chuckles because of what she'd have to move if she cut loose with anything more violent than that. If I'd known she was going to be runing in front of our house, I'd have set up some chairs and charged admission.

I watched her until she started up our walk, and then I headed for the stairs. I got to the front hall just as she came stumbling across the

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porch. My Grandfather Rastin had seen her coming, and he was waiting at the front door. He helped her out of her raincoat, and she gasped, "Elizabeth . . ." and collapsed onto the sofa.

"Take it easy," Grandfather said.

"Elizabeth . . ."

"Elizabeth will keep for a couple of minutes. She's standing out on her porch now, looking over this way, so she can't be in very bad shape. Wait till you get your breath back."

For the next ten minutes Mrs. Beyers panted on the sofa, and was hushed up by Grandfather every time she opened her mouth. I came close to dying of curiosity, but Grandfather sat down and rocked as if it was an ordinary social call. He always says the first lesson a man has to learn from life is patience, and in eighty years he'd learned it pretty well.

Finally Mrs. Beyers got a grip on her breathing, and Grandfather let her talk.

"Elizabeth found a violin in her attic!" she said.

Grandfather nodded. "You don't say. That'd be . . ."

"It's a Strad—Strad—"

"Stradivarius? You don't say. That'd be . . ."

"It's worth a fortune."

"You don't say. That'd be Old Eric's fiddle. I heard him play it many times, when I was a boy. I often wondered what happened to it."

"It's a godsend, what with Elizabeth needing money for Ellie's wedding. She wants you to come and see it."

"I've seen it," Grandfather said. "Many times. Old Eric was quite a fiddler in his day."

"He lived to be a hundred and two," Mrs. Beyers said.

"A hundred and three. And he loved to tell about the time . . ."

"Will you come and see it?"

"I suppose."

We got our raincoats and went back to Elizabeth Peterson's house with Mrs. Beyers, all three of us walking very sedately. . . .

Elizabeth Peterson has been a widow for more years than I am old, and in a friendly sort of way half the women in Borgville hate her. She's the example everyone holds up to them. She has no regular income at all, and has to work at anything offered to her at Borgville wages, which aren't much; but somehow she manages wonderfully well.

Lately, though, she'd been worried. Her daughter Ellie, the prettiest girl in Borgville, was graduating from high school and getting married. Her fiancé was Mark Hanson, whose father is our Village President, and President of the Borgville Bank, and the richest man in town. Naturally, Mrs. Peterson wanted her daughter to have the prettiest wedding and the biggest and best reception in the history of Borgville, if not the whole

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state of Michigan; but she didn't have any money.

So I wasn't surprised to find her hardly touching the floor as she paced up and down her porch waiting for us. Even I had a vague notion that a genuine Stradivarius might be worth a lot of money.

"Do you think it really is?" she asked Grandfather, all out of breath, as if she, rather than Mrs. Beyers, had been doing the running.

"Of all the things I'm not an expert in," Grandfather said, "it's violins. But I'll take a look. How'd you happen to find it?"

"It was more a matter of remembering it than finding it. It's been up there in the corner of the attic for years, and I guess I just forgot it was there. The funny thing is, I knew all the time it was valuable. It's a tradition in the Peterson family. My husband told me once that when he was a little boy playing in the attic, his mother would tell him not to go near Grandpa Eric's fiddle, because it was a valuable instrument. It never occurred to me that the value could be measured in money."

"It's the usual way of doing it," Grandfather said.

"Anyway, yesterday at the church social Miss Borg gave a talk about people finding fortunes in their attics—in old stamps and books and things; so afterwards I asked her—just as a joke—about old violins, and she came by today, and—come in and see it."

Miss Borg was still there, standing by the big round dining-room table. She's a little old lady with white hair, and she looks nothing like the terror she is teaching history at Borgville High School. The violin was on the table, and she was gazing at it as if it were the Holy Grail in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, which is one of the numerous epics the students at Borgville High have stuffed into them.

The violin looked like something that might possibly raise nine cents at a rummage sale. The case was a battered old thing of wood. The hinges were missing, and it had been held together with a couple pieces of rope. The one string left on it had snapped, and the whole contraption was falling apart. There were loose pieces in the bottom of the case, and on the violin there was a big crack along one side, which meant that whatever else it might do, it would never hold water. There was loose hair all over the place, except on the bow where it belonged.

Miss Borg said when she was a little girl she heard the Peterson family legend about Old Eric's valuable violin, but she doubted that anyone, including Old Eric, ever realized just how valuable it was. She shined a flashlight down into the violin, and said, "Look!"

Grandfather looked, and then I looked. Pasted inside the violin was a piece of paper, brown with age, and on the paper were some letters.

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The ink had faded, and some of it was illegible, but with Miss Borg's help I was able to make out; . . . *adivarius Cremon* . . .

"That's the label," Miss Borg whispered. "See—it says so right here." She had a thick book called *Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, and under "Stradivari, Antonio," it said, "His label reads: 'Antonius Stradivarius Cremonensis. Fecit Anno. . . .'"

Grandfather scratched away at his head. "I guess it might say that. The only way to tell whether or not it's genuine is to take it to an expert. I suppose if it's a valuable instrument it could be fixed up."

"A violin maker could take it all apart and put it together again," Miss Borg said. "It would be as good as new. Better. An old instrument is always better than a new one."

"Maybe," Grandfather said. "My advice would be not to get excited about it until you hear what an expert has to say."

Mrs. Peterson wasn't listening. "What do you think it's worth?"

"I've heard that Stradivarius violins bring as much as fifty thousand dollars," Miss Borg said. "Or more. Of course some are worth more than others. Even if it isn't one of the best ones it should bring quite a lot. Five or ten thousand dollars, at least."

"Five or ten thousand!" Mrs. Peterson said.

"Since it's Saturday, you won't be able to do anything with it before the first of the week," Grandfather said. "First thing Monday morning."

"Five or ten thousand!" Mrs. Peterson said again. Most likely she'd just moved the wedding reception from the church basement to the big room above the Star Restaurant.

"Maybe there's someone in Jackson who'd know about it," Grandfather said. "On Monday. . . ."

Mrs. Peterson still wasn't listening. She looked again at the violin—looked at it as if she was seeing it for the first time—and then she sat down and started to cry. Grandfather dragged me out of there, and on the front porch we met Hazel Morgan, Dorothy Ashley, and Ruth Wood, all coming to see the violin. Half a dozen others were on their way, from various directions. It was then I noticed that Mrs. Beyers hadn't come in with us. She was out spreading the Good Word.

Grandfather hadn't anything to say on the way home, or even after we got there. As soon as it stopped raining he went over to Main Street to borrow the Detroit paper from Mr. Snubbs, who runs the Snubbs Hardware Store; and the rest of the day, whenever I mentioned the violin, he hushed me up.

"Whether or not a violin was made by Stradivarius is just not the kind of question I can settle," he said. "I refuse to waste any energy even thinking about it."

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"Miss Borg shouldn't have spouted off about all those dollars before they find out for sure," I said.

"Miss Borg should be shot."

On Saturday night all the stores in Borgville stay open late so the farmers can spend the money they were too busy to spend all week, and almost everyone comes to town. That night the talk up and down Main Street was about Elizabeth Peterson's violin. Suddenly everyone in town remembered hearing a grandfather, or an uncle, or some elderly person down the street tell about what a remarkable fiddler Old Eric Peterson was, and what a valuable violin he had. The queer thing was that my Grandfather Rastin, who usually remembers such things better than anyone else, was acting skeptical about the whole business.

He and some other old-timers were sitting on the benches in front of Jake Palmer's Barber Shop, and when Grandfather suggested that it might be better to get an expert's opinion before sticking a price tag on the violin, Nat Barlow got pretty hot about it.

"Everyone knows it's valuable," he said. "My father heard Old Eric say so himself. Anyway, Old Eric played dances all over this part of the state, even some in Detroit, and everyone said he was the best fiddler they'd ever heard. Why wouldn't he have a valuable violin?"

"Is Sam Cowell in town tonight?" Grandfather asked.

"Haven't seen him," Nat said.

"How much would you say his car is worth?"

Everyone laughed. "That pile of junk?" Nat said.

"There isn't a better driver in Borg County than Sam Cowell," Grandfather said. "Seeing as he's such a good driver, why wouldn't he have a valuable car?"

That shut Nat up for the next hour or so.

"I've been trying to remember a few things about Old Eric," Grandfather said. "He loved to talk about the time he played for Ole Bull, and Ole Bull. . . ."

"Who—or what—is Ole Bull?" someone asked.

"He was a famous Norwegian violinist. One of the greatest." Grandfather said. "He was touring the country giving concerts, and Old Eric went way off to Cincinnati, or Chicago, or somewhere to hear him. He took his fiddle along, on the chance of picking up some money along the way, and after the concert he got to meet Ole Bull. He introduced himself as another Norwegian fiddler, and Ole Bull asked him to play. Old Eric . . ."

The crowd wasn't much interested in Ole Bull. "They tell me a Wiston reporter was over to see Elizabeth this evening," Bob Ashley said. "There'll be a piece about the violin in the Wiston news paper."

"Got your oats in yet, Bob?" Grandfather asked.

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"I don't suppose a Stradivarius violin turns up every day," Bob said.

That was when Grandfather headed for home, looking mighty disgusted. I caught up with him and asked for his version of the Peterson family legend.

"I never heard of any legend," he said. "Old Eric may have told his family something about that violin, and whatever he told them was so, because Old Eric was no fool. If it was a Stradivarius violin he'd have known it, and so would everyone else in Borgville, which makes it seem odd that I never heard anything about it. On the other hand, I do remember *something* about Old Eric's fiddle, but I haven't been able to recollect what it is."

After Sunday dinner the next day, we sat on our front porch and watched the procession to Elizabeth Peterson's house. Those who hadn't seen the violin yet wanted to see it, and a lot of those who'd seen it wanted to see it again, and traffic on our street was heavy.

Then Mark Hanson came by. He was home from the University for the week-end, and on his way to an afternoon date with Ellie. Mrs. Beyers met him in front of our house, and made some crack about him marrying an heiress, and he shrugged and came up on the porch to talk to Grandfather.

"Family tradition to the contrary," he said, "I don't think that violin is worth a button. And it can't possibly be a Stradivarius. It has a very odd shape—too short and too wide. Did you notice?"

"One violin looks just about like another one to me," Grandfather said.

"I talked to Mr. Gardner—he's the orchestra director at Wiston High School. He says thousands of violins have a Stradivarius label, but all it means is that the violin maker *copied* a Stradivarius violin, or tried to. This one isn't even a good copy."

"What does Ellie think about all this?" Grandfather asked.

"Oh, she agrees with me, but we're both worried about her mother. The truth will be a terrible blow to her, and there doesn't seem to be a thing we can do about it. Mr. Gardner is coming over this evening to see the violin. Most likely one look is all he'll need."

"If it's the wrong shape, as you say, then anyone who knows violins would see that right away. When is he coming?"

"He wasn't sure—sometime after eight."

"I'll be over," Grandfather said. "I'd like to hear what he has to say."

"Glad to have you," Mark said. "But please don't tell anyone else he's coming. What he has to say may not be good news, and I don't want a big audience there."

Mark went after Ellie, and the two of them walked back up the

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street hand in hand, Ellie looking pretty in a new spring dress and Mark admiring her as a fiancé should. By that time I'd gotten tired watching the procession, so I went off to play baseball; but I made a point of being on hand when Grandfather went over to Peterson's that evening.

News has a way of getting around in Borgville, and there was a good crowd there—enough to fill the parlor, anyway. Mrs. Peterson bustled about, happy and excited, trying to feed everyone. The Peterson family legend got another kicking around, and every now and then someone would go into the dining room for another look at the violin.

It was nearly nine o'clock when Mr. Gardner came up the street, driving slowly and looking for house numbers, which very few houses in Borgville have. He had to be introduced to everyone, and he went through the motions of this in a very abrupt way, as if he wanted to get on with the business at hand. I noticed when I shook hands with him that his hands were white and soft, and sometimes he would bow to a lady and show the bald spot at the top of his head.

"It's in here," Mark said finally, and led him into the dining room. Miss Borg and Mrs. Peterson and Ellie went along. The rest of us crowded up to the big arch that separates the dining room from the parlor, and watched.

Miss Borg tried to give Mr. Gardner the flashlight, so he could see the label, but he waved it away. "I don't care what's written inside," he said. He picked up the violin, and it came out of the case trailing loose parts. He looked at it, turned it over for a glance at the bottom, and put it back.

There wasn't a sound in the house. In the parlor everyone had stopped breathing.

I will say this for him—he didn't prolong the suspense.

"Junk!" he said.

Mrs. Peterson's face went suddenly white. "You mean—it isn't worth anything?"

"Worth anything?" Mr. Gardner snorted. Grandfather snorts sometimes, when he's real disgusted, but this was a different kind of snort. A nasty kind. "It's worth something, I suppose. If you had it fixed up, which would cost—oh, maybe fifty dollars, if you include a new case—then you might be able to sell it for twenty-five. My recommendation is that you burn it—there are enough bad violins around. One less would make the world a better place—a better place for violin teachers, anyway."

He left without waiting to be thanked—though Mrs. Peterson was in no condition to thank him anyway. Everyone else left right after him, except Miss Borg, who was indignant, and Grandfather, who seemed very thoughtful.

"The idea!" Miss Borg said.

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"Why, he didn't even look at the label!"

"If you don't mind . . ." Mrs. Peterson said. Then she started to cry, and it wasn't at all like the crying she'd done when she thought the violin was worth a lot of money.

"Don't burn it just yet," Grandfather said to Ellie. "I want another look at it myself."

Ellie nodded, and Mark showed us to the front door.

"Well," I said to Grandfather as we crossed the street, "I guess the wedding reception is back in the church basement."

He didn't ssem to hear me. "I finally remembered something," he said.

"Something about the violin?"

"It was such a long time ago. I was only a boy, you know, when Old Eric died. But it seems . . ."

He went straight up to the rocking chair in his bedroom, where he usually takes his problems, and he was still rocking when I went to bed. I couldn't see how rocking would turn Mrs. Peterson's piece of junk into a valuable violin, but I didn't ask him about it. There are times when it is better not to bother Grandfather with questions, and one of them is when he's in his rocking chair.

In the morning it seemed as if all his rocking was wasted, because Sheriff Pilkins dropped in while we were at breakfast, to ask Grandfather if he'd heard anything about a burglary the night before.

"Not yet, I haven't," Grandfather said. "Where was it?"

"Elizabeth Peterson's house," the Sheriff said. "Someone stole a violin."

Grandfather and I yelped together. "Violin!"

"Yep. She had this violin on her dining-room table, and when she came down this morning it was gone. Naturally she can't remember the last time she bothered to lock her doors. Funny thing, though—the burglar wasn't really stealing it. He was buying it. He left her an envelope full of money."

"How much money?" Grandfather asked.

"A thousand dollars."

Grandfather whistled, and I dropped the toast into my cereal. "Last night Mr. Gardner said that violin might be worth twenty-five dollars if she spent fifty dollars fixing it up," I said.

"So I heard," the Sheriff said. "There are some funny angles to this case. How many people knew she had what might be a valuable violin?"

"Half of Borg County," Grandfather said.

"Right. And how many of them knew this Mr. Gardner said the violin was practically worthless?"

"Those that were there last night, and whoever they managed to tell before they went to bed. Maybe about a fourth of Borg County."

"That leaves a lot of people who didn't know."

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"You won't have any trouble narrowing down your list of suspects," Grandfather said. "There aren't very many people around here who'd have a ready thousand dollars for a speculative flutter on a violin."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"How is Elizabeth taking it?"

"Not very well. She's pretty blamed mad about the whole thing. She's sure now that the violin is worth a fortune, and someone is trying to do her out of it."

"It's just possible that taking a thousand dollars for that violin is more of a crime than stealing it."

"That's what I think myself. But Elizabeth is certain the thief wouldn't have left the thousand if he hadn't known it was worth a lot more. She wants her violin back, and hang the money. Which is why I'm here. You didn't chance to notice any suspicious-looking characters hanging around last night, did you?"

"Borgville doesn't have any suspicious-looking characters," Grandfather said.

"They're all suspicious-looking to me. Look—I know you can come up with information I can't touch. Let me know if you find out anything."

Grandfather nodded. "I'll go have a talk with Elizabeth, and look around."

So Grandfather went to Peterson's, and I went to school. Miss Borg intercepted me in the hallway, and asked me if I'd heard the news. She seemed excited about it—in fact, until I could get to a dictionary I thought she was excited to the point of being sick, because she said she felt vindicated.

I didn't go home for lunch, so I don't know how Grandfather spent the day. Sheriff Pilkins passed the time working, which is something he has no natural aptitude for, and when he came to see Grandfather that evening he was looking glum.

"I have a list of suspects," he announced.

"Good," Grandfather said. "Then you're further along than I am."

Normally it would cheer the Sheriff up to find he's ahead of Grandfather in anything, but this time it seemed to make him mad. "Lucy Borg," he said, "was pretty irked at what Gardner said about the violin. She could have taken it with the idea of getting another expert opinion on it."

"Somehow I can't see Lucy burgling a house. And where would she get a thousand dollars?"

"Then there's this Gardner—he could have lied about the violin, and then stolen it so he could sell it himself. Elizabeth favors this theory."

"Why?"

"Who knows why a woman thinks anything? Gardner supports a big family on a schoolteacher's salary, and he wouldn't have been

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able to lay his hands on a thousand dollars on a Sunday night. Then there's Pete Wilks, who lives on Maple Street right behind Peterson's. He took an unusual interest in that violin."

"He had an old violin of his own," Grandfather said. "He was interested in finding out if his might be valuable. There is also the question of where he would get a thousand dollars. The money complicates things."

"It sure does. My favorite would be Mark Hanson. It's common knowledge that the Hansons tried to give Elizabeth money for the wedding, and she wouldn't take it. Mark could have used this as a back-handed way of making her take the money, and the Hansons are one family that could come up with a thousand dollars in a hurry. The only trouble is, they didn't do it. Mark was with Ellie until nearly midnight, and then his folks drove him back to Ann Arbor and stayed there overnight."

"So where does that leave you?" Grandfather asked.

"Nowhere!"

"I have an idea or two. Let's go see Elizabeth."

Mrs. Peterson met us at the door, and she didn't waste any time showing what was on her mind. "Did you get it back?" she asked the Sheriff.

Sheriff Pilkins sputtered all over the place. I guess law officers don't like blunt demands for quick results. They'd rather talk about all the progress they're making, which they can do without getting any results at all.

"Did you think over what we talked about this morning?" Grandfather asked.

"I certainly did," Mrs. Peterson said. "I want the violin."

"Give me the money, then, and I'll try and get it back for you."

The Sheriff stared at Grandfather. "Where are you going to get it?"

"The law isn't involved in this," Grandfather said. "Party unknown bought Elizabeth's violin for a thousand dollars. The transaction isn't satisfactory to her, so she's going to take the violin back and return the money,—if I can arrange it, that is."

"Baloney!" the Sheriff shouted. "I don't see that there's much you can do about it."

The Sheriff didn't seem to, either, and he stood there glaring at Grandfather. I'm not one who cares much for art, but I never get tired of watching the way his face changes color when he and Grandfather meet head-on. Finally he stomped down off the porch, muttering something about accessories, and withholding information, and interfering with legal processes. Mrs. Peterson came back with an envelope and handed it to Grandfather.

"You understand," Grandfather said, "that if Gardner turns out to be right about the violin you've made a bad deal for yourself."

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"We went through all that this morning," she said. "I want the violin."

"I'll get it for you if I can."

Grandfather stuffed the envelope into his shirt pocket, and the two of us went home.

I'd like to tell you all about Grandfather's system for tracking down a thief, but I can't. I expected him to make a mysterious telephone call as soon as it got dark, and then head for a meeting in some alleyway. Instead, he sat down and read all evening, and he was still reading when I went to bed.

In the morning, when I went down to breakfast, the violin was lying on *our* dining-room table.

"Where'd you get it?" I asked.

"You're most as bad as Pilkins. What difference does it make? Elizabeth will be satisfied, the person who took it is satisfied, and beyond that what happened is nobody's business."

After breakfast he took the violin over to Elizabeth Peterson, who was very happy to have it back—that is, she was happy until later that day, when Mr. Hanson drove her to Jackson to see a violin repair man there. This man told her even more emphatically than Mr. Gardner that the violin was nothing but junk, and he didn't think it would be worth twenty-five dollars even if it was fixed up.

The violin went back to the Peterson attic, and Mrs. Peterson started all over again to try to figure out how to pay for a big wedding and reception without any money, and Sheriff Pilkins stopped by three times a day the rest of the week in the hope of prying the name of the violin thief out of Grandfather.

Other than that, nothing happened. That is, I thought nothing happened, but on Friday, Jimmy Edwards, whose mother works in the telephone office at Wiston, asked me how come Grandfather was getting all those long distance telephone calls.

"What long distance telephone calls?" I asked.

"How would I know if you don't?" Jimmy said. "All I know is, Mom said your Grandfather has been getting calls from all over—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago . . ."

"I don't know," I said, "but I'm sure going to find out."

But I didn't. All Grandfather did when I asked him was grunt and shrug. All Friday evening he grunted and he shrugged, and all Saturday morning, until about ten o'clock. Then a big limousine such as had never before been seen in Borgville drove up in front of our house. A chauffeur in a fancy uniform popped out and opened the rear door, and a tall, gray-headed man got out and walked up to our house.

Grandfather met him on the porch.

"You're Mr. Rastin?" the man asked.

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Grandfather nodded, and shook hands with him.

"Where is it?" the man asked.

"Across the street," Grandfather said.

They headed for the Peterson house, with me tagging along, and Grandfather introduced the man to Mrs. Peterson—his name was Edmund Van Something-or-other—and sent Ellie chasing up to the attic after the violin. We sat down in the parlor and waited.

"Has it been in your family for a long time?" Mr. Van asked.

"It belonged to my husband's great-greatgrandfather," Mrs. Peterson said.

"You don't say. Treasures are often preserved in this way. My first Stradivarius violin . . ."

Ellie bounced in, all out of breath, and carefully placed the violin on a coffee table beside Mr. Van. She untied the knots and took off the top of the case, and then she scooted back out of the way, as if she expected Mr. Van would be throwing the violin at someone as soon as he saw it.

He did look at the violin. He looked at it once, with an expression of disgust such as I never hope to see again. Then he picked up the loose lid of the case, and held it on his lap looking at the violin bow that was hooked onto it. "François Tourte!" he said.

"The label is under that little dohicky that screws in and out," Grandfather said.

"Under the frog. Yes. It really has a label?"

He unscrewed something or other, fished a magnifying glass out of his pocket, and said, speaking very softly, "This bow was made by François Tourte in 1822, aged seventy-five years. Splendid! Tourte never branded his bows, and rarely labeled them."

"Is it genuine?" Grandfather asked.

"Unquestionably genuine."

"I had no way of knowing. A label, of course, can be stuck onto anything."

"Unfortunately true. Even a violin such as that one—" he made a face, "—could have a Stradivarius label. But craftsmanship cannot, as you say, be stuck on. One look at the shape of the head—Tourte. It still has the original frog—Tourte. The thickness of the shaft, the narrow ferrule—all unmistakably Tourte. And it's in remarkably fine condition. The grip is a little worn. The slide, too, but not badly. The man who owned this bow knew its value. I stand by my offer. I'll pay four thousand dollars for it."

He looked at Mrs. Peterson, and for a long moment she couldn't find her voice. "You want to buy the violin?" she stammered.

Mr. Van winced. "Not the violin. The bow. This bow, Ma'am, was made by François Tourte, who was to the violin bow what Stradivarius was to the violin. And more. There were great violin makers be-

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fore Stradivarius, but Tourte created the moden bow—its design, its materials, to some extent its mechanics. Without the Tourte bow, string instrument technique as we know it would be impossible, and the work of the great instrument makers would to a considerable extent be wasted. Will you sell the bow for four thousand dollars, Ma'am?"

"It's a very good offer," Grandfather said.

Mrs. Peterson still didn't seem to understand. "You mean—the violin . . ."

Mr. Van clapped his hand to his forehead. "The violin I do not want, but I'll buy it if I must. What is it worth? Five dollars? Ten? I'll give you four thousand and ten dollars for the violin and the bow."

"Oh," Mrs. Peterson said. "You just want the bow. I'll sell that, and keep the violin as a—a memento."

"Splendid!" Mr. Van whipped out a check book and began to scribble. He presented the check, shook hands with everyone present, and walked back to his car carrying the lid of the case with the bow still hooked onto it. He carried it the way I've seen couples carry their first baby when they bring it home from the hospital.

Mrs. Peterson sat down and gazed at the check for a long time. "I don't know how to thank you," she said. Then she started to cry, and Ellie looked as if she wanted to cry, too, and it was as good a time as any for Grandfather and me to get out of there, which we did.

"Sheriff Pilkins will have a fit," I said, when we got back to our porch.

"It'll do him good," Grandfather said.

"He'll say anyone who stole something worth four thousand dollars belongs behind bars, and he'll threaten to put you there if you don't tell him who it was."

"Let him threaten," Grandfather said. "That was one crime that will stay unsolved permanently."

"How'd you know the thing was valuable?"

"Something I remembered Old Eric saying. He played for Ole Bull, and he had a bow that was better than anything Ole Bull had. Ole Bull tried to buy it from him. I figured if the bow was good enough back in the eighteen sixties, or whenever it was, for a great violinist to want it, it might still be worth something. But none of these local experts thought to look at the bow. The violin was unbelievably bad, and it distracted their attention. So when I got the chance I looked at the bow, and I found that label. I told Professor Mueller, at Wiston College, and he said a Tourte bow might be worth a fair amount of money, and the person who'd pay the most for it would be a collector of old instruments."

"Why not a violinist?" I asked.

"A bow can be made today that plays just as well as that one. May-

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be a little better, for all I know. It's the same as with postage stamps. An old stamp may be worth hundreds of dollars, but you can buy one at the post office for four cents that will do just as good a job of getting a letter through the mails. Professor Mueller got the word around to some collectors, and this man made the best offer, so I told him to come and see the bow."

"Then Old Eric knew the bow was valuable, rather than the violin, but after he died the family legend got things twisted."

"I suppose."

"That still doesn't explain who stole the violin."

"Like I said, that's one crime that won't ever be solved."

"I'm not so sure," I said. "I think I can figure it out myself. Someone thought the violin just *might* be worth something in spite of what Mr. Gardner said. So he went to Mr. Hanson, and said, 'Look, we should get this violin to a genuine expert, but of course there's a good chance that it really isn't worth anything, so why not do it this way. You put up a thousand dollars, and I'll steal the violin and leave the money. If it turns out to be worth more, we can give Mrs. Peterson the difference. If it turns out to be worthless, she'll still have the thousand dollars for the wedding. She wouldn't accept the money as a gift, and now that Mr. Gardner has said the violin is junk she wouldn't sell it to us for a thousand dollars, because she'd figure that would be the same as a gift. But if we steal it, and leave the money, she'll think the thief didn't know it was junk and she's made a good deal for herself.' The only trouble was, Mrs. Peterson thought otherwise, and called in the Sheriff and messed everything up."

"Not bad," Grandfather said. "It only goes to show that you can't figure out in advance how a woman will react to anything."

"And of course there was only one person who had any reason to think the violin—or the bow—might be valuable even after Mr. Gardner said it was nothing but junk."

Grandfather grinned. "Right again. I stole it myself."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **FREDRIC BROWN**

TITLE: ***The Assistant Murderer***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Sangstrom needed help, and he had heard a rumor that the druggist . . .*

"I HEARD A RUMOR," SANGSTROM SAID, "to the effect that you—"

He turned his head and looked about him to make absolutely sure that he and the druggist were alone in the tiny prescription pharmacy. The druggist was a gnome-like gnarled little man who could have been any age from fifty to a hundred.

They were alone, but Sangstrom dropped his voice just the same. "— to the effect that you have a completely undetectable poison."

The druggist nodded. He came around the counter and locked the front door of the shop, then walked toward a doorway behind the counter. "I was about to take a coffee break," he said. "Come with me and have a cup."

Sangstrom followed him around the counter and through the doorway to a back room ringed by shelves of bottles from floor to ceiling. The druggist plugged in an electric percolator, found two cups and put them on a table that had a chair on either side of it. He motioned Sangstrom to one of the chairs and took the other himself.

"Now," he said. "Tell me. Whom do you want to kill, and why?"

"Does it matter?" Sangstrom asked. "Isn't it enough that I pay for—."

The druggist interrupted him with an upraised hand. "Yes, it matters. I must be convinced that you deserve what I can give you. Otherwise—" He shrugged.

"All right," Sangstrom said. "The *whom* is my wife. The *why*—"

He started the long story. Before

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he had quite finished, the percolator had completed its task and the druggist briefly interrupted to get the coffee for them. Sangstrom concluded his story.

The little druggist nodded. "Yes, I occasionally dispense an undetectable poison. I do so freely; I do not charge for it, if I think the case is deserving. I have helped many murderers."

"Fine," Sangstrom said. "Please give it to me, then."

The druggist smiled at him. "I already have. By the time the coffee was ready I had decided that you deserved it. It was, as I said, free. But there is a price for the antidote."

Sangstrom turned pale. But he had anticipated—not this, but the possibility of a double-cross or some form of blackmail. He pulled a pistol from his pocket.

The little druggist chuckled. "You daren't use that. Can you find the antidote—" he waved at the shelves "—among those thousands of bottles? Or would you find a faster, more virulent poison? Or if you think I'm bluffing, that you are not really poisoned, go ahead and shoot. You'll know the answer within three hours when the poison starts to work."

"How much for the antidote?" Sangstrom growled.

"Quite reasonable—one thousand dollars. After all, a man must live; even if his hobby is preventing murders, there's no reason why he shouldn't make money at it, is there?"

Sangstrom growled and put the pistol down, but within reach, and took out his wallet. Maybe after he had the antidote, he'd still use that pistol. He counted out a thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills and put them on the table.

The druggist made no immediate move to pick them up. He said, "And one other thing—for your wife's safety and mine. You will write a confession of your intention—your former intention, I trust—to murder your wife. Then you will wait till I go out and mail it to a friend of mine on the homicide detail. He'll keep it as evidence in case you ever *do* decide to kill your wife. Or me, for that matter.

"When that is in the mail it will be safe for me to return here and give you the antidote. I'll get you paper and pen. Oh, one other thing—although I do not absolutely insist on it. Please help spread the word about my undetectable poison, will you? One never knows, Mr. Sangstrom. The life you save, if you have any enemies, just might be your own."

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THE CLUE OF THE KNAVE OF DIAMONDS

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

(*continued from page 52*)

Dinner came off much better than lunch. There was a resolute effort toward normality. Fergus was chiefly responsible—he kept things going with a deftness which never made itself obvious. He chatted blithely on everything from anecdotes of his detective experience to Irish anecdotes from his father's repertory.

The others slowly entered into the spirit of things. Kay chaffed Fergus with legends of his obstreperous childhood which she had heard from Maureen. Colonel Rand contributed fascinating details of great strokes of military strategy. Even the quiet Bill Harding revealed himself in the surprising role of a connoisseur of limericks, who experienced some difficulty in displaying his collection in mixed company. Camilla, encouraged by this turn of the conversation, came forth with an amazing saga of her encounters as a percentage girl.

Only Arthur Willowe was silent. He was no longer hysterical, but fear still brooded sullenly over him.

For the evening, Rand abandoned his part of Watson. He visited a bit with Kay, played a game of chess with Harding (first-rate chess mind for a young man—small wonder Garnett had kept him), and finally went for a walk. A cigar in the cool evening, he thought, would do him more good than standing by while Fergus studied the card collection and went over the research notes with Harding. He'd learn it all from the young Irishman in the morning anyway.

The hills proved as admirable for walking as he had hoped. You had the beauty of the city's distant lights without the overpowering proximity of its noises. There was moonlight and a fresh breeze. A younger man might have become sentimental; to Rand it was simply a perfect night for exercise both of body and of mind.

A Watson, he reflected, is always supposed to have his own ideas on a case, if only so that the detective may refute them. So, as he strolled and smoked in the sweet of the night, he went over the possibilities carefully.

Opportunity, so far as was known, included the entire household. Motive was a narrower question. Vinton, of course—but for Kay's sake he must be eliminated. Kay herself—obviously absurd. Miss Sallice—he admitted that he was not convinced of the innocence of her relations with Garnett. But what had she to gain by his death? Unless perhaps a codicil to the will . . . And what was this possibility that she had almost mentioned to O'Breen? Yes, assuredly the dark girl was a still unknown factor in the case.

To Bill Harding, Garnett's death meant only the loss of a good job. To Arthur Willowe—Rand paused. $10,000 would mean a degree of independence—perhaps the first Willowe had ever known. And if he feared Garnett so much . . .

Reluctantly, the Colonel gave up his puzzling and turned back toward

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the house. As he drew near, he heard voices on the sun porch. Now eavesdropping should be the last act of an honorable officer, retired or not; but he came closer because one of the voices was strange. He couldn't help thinking of their great need for an outsider; and the voice of a stranger talking with Kay was too great a temptation.

". . . since before you ever met him," the voice was saying. "You've known that, I'm afraid, even though I've tried so hard to hide it."

"Yes," Kay answered softly. "I've known. And I haven't been very happy about it."

"When your happiness is all I ever wanted. Kay, my dear, I wouldn't have spoken even now. Perhaps it isn't fair. But we can't be sure. For your sake, I hope he is innocent; but even if he is, that doesn't mean he'll go scotfree. They may make out a case against him anyway. And I want you to know that—well, that I'm here. For anything you want."

"That's sweet of you." Her voice was clouded a little. "But why did you wait so long? If you'd said a little word even a year ago . . . But it's silly to think about that now. All—all this has just made me stronger. You see, my dear, I'm so much more to him now. And I love him very much."

The strange man's voice was humble and broken. "I shouldn't have said a word. But I couldn't—oh, well." He seemed to regain his control. "We'll get him off somehow."

Colonel Rand swore silently. Stranger's voice, indeed! He recognized it now—Bill Harding's. It was only that emotional stress had distorted it from its natural quiet precision. Rand mentally gave himself a severe and well-aimed kick. Eavesdropping on this poor young man, hopelessly confessing his love for Kay! And who wouldn't love her?

The Colonel lit a fresh cigar, gave an especially loud harrumph, and joined the couple on the sun porch.

Under the circumstances, conversation was forced and awkward. Rand excused himself as soon as politeness permitted, and retired to the room which had been assigned to him.

But his involuntary eavesdropping was not over for the night. As he started down the hall to the bathroom, dressed in the crimson tailored bathrobe which was the one flamboyant touch in his otherwise conservative taste, he saw Camilla Sallice tapping on the door of one of the bedrooms.

He was still unfamiliar with the house. He could not be sure whose room it was. But as he reclined in a warm tub and lathered himself richly, he worried over the small problem. Then the answer hit him: that was the only one of the bedrooms, aside from his own, which he had entered that day. Besides, Fergus was in the study and Kay and Harding were presumably still downstairs. Yes, the Sallice girl was paying a secret visit to Arthur Willowe! Though "secret," he reminded himself, was a somewhat unfair word. There had been nothing surreptitious about her manner.

Nonetheless, he took a long time in the tub. At last he left the bathroom, turning out the light, only to retire at once into the shelter of the dark doorway. Camilla Sallice was leaving the bedroom which she had entered.

The hall made a good sounding-

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box. "Thank you, my dear," Rand could hear—and there was no mistaking Arthur Willowe's thin voice. "You have made me very happy indeed. And now that I know your secret, perhaps I should tell you my own. Yes, Camilla, I will tell you." There was a curious mixture of pride and shame in the voice. "I am Hector Prynne."

"No!" Her rich voice was incredulous. "You? How fantastic!" She laughed deep in her throat—the happiest laugh which Rand had heard from her.

"There! Now we're even, aren't we?" And Arthur Willowe kissed the dark girl long and tenderly.

Colonel Rand slept confusedly that night. His wild fragmentary dreams seemed no more unreal than had that whole day—from the insane taxi ride in the morning through horror and sorrow to that last unbelievable scene at night.

He awoke to find bright sun pouring into the room and Fergus O'Breen perched on his bed. The polo shirt looked yellower than ever.

"Top o' the mornin'," said Fergus.

The Colonel was still not fully awake. "What time is it?" he mumbled.

"Ten. We decided—the Client and I—to let you sleep. But it's high time you were up now and heard the news. I know what Garnett's secret researches were and I know who Hector is—so up with you, my somnolent Watson, and hear all the fascinating facts."

A shower and a man-sized breakfast brought Rand to himself again, despite the restless night. As he lit his first cigar of the day, he settled back to hear Fergus's news.

The young man was pacing even more vigorously than usual. "As you know," he began, "Harding and I went over those notes of Garnett's last night. They were all in order, all dealing with the alexi-whateveryoucallit gas, excepting one bunch. Those weren't complete—they were just random notes that seemed to have got in with the others by mistake. The complete file must be hidden away some place—possibly in Garnett's safe-deposit box. Anyway, Harding had a go at finding out what they meant. He worked on it quite a bit, while I went over the card collection—with gloves. And do I know things about cards now! Colonel, I could dazzle you with my erudition.

"But that's neither here nor there, except for Hector. Suddenly Harding jumped up and cried, 'Great Scott! I can't believe it!' And a lot more shocked expressions. 'Can't believe what?' I asked, and he explained.

"That is, he called it an explanation. It was a little too technical for me, so I can't give you the real McCoy on it. But it boils down to this: Humphrey Garnett's private researches were also on a gas—but it was a poison gas. When he worked alone, he was undoing all the work he'd done with Harding. And Harding says, from what he can make out of those fragments, it would have been the most deadly poison gas yet known. He was terribly cut up about it—he takes his pacificism pretty much to heart, and this was a bad blow. I can't understand it myself: how could a man work toward two such different ends?"

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The Colonel poured himself more coffee. "I can understand it," he said, "because I knew Garnett. There was no inconsistency in that for him. Good and evil meant nothing to him as abstractions, even granting your idea that military preparedness is evil. But we won't argue that. He was interested in the research problem itself, not in its outcome. And his devilishly ingenious mind must have delighted in finding a puzzle that could be worked both ways. It was like working out a chess problem. With one half of his mind he'd try to concoct a 'good' gas that would counteract any poison gas known; with the other he'd work toward an 'evil' gas that even his own 'good' gas couldn't lick. He was his own rival, and he couldn't have found a more worthy one."

"Hmm. I guess it does make sense, in a screwy way. But I don't think you could ever get Harding to see it that way. Which makes me think that if he'd come across those notes earlier and figured out what Garnett was doing alone—well, you see what I mean? Only why should he hate Vinton so much as to try to frame him?"

Colonel Rand began to feel decidedly self-confident. Here was something else he could explain to the detective. "Because," he said, and his conscience hurt him a little, "he's in love with Kay."

"Which may or may not make sense. You'd think he'd see that a false accusation would be all that was needed to tie Kay to Vinton even more closely. And that's the way it's working out. Now as to Hector—"

"I also know who he is," Rand announced proudly. "He is Arthur Willowe."

"The devil he is!"

Rand told about the episode of last night.

"Look. That may have nothing to do with it. And I may be wrong too. But here's what I found out. And now that I think of it, they may work out together. Remember how we were talking last night about how some cards have names—the Earl o' Cork and the Devil's Bedposts?"

"Yes."

"Well, in French decks all the court cards have special names—often printed on the cards themselves. Nobody seems to know quite how they got these names, and they used to vary a lot; but now they're fixed to a given set, which any card collector, of course, would know by heart. They're very fancy names—Queen of Hearts, Judith; Jack of Clubs—I still won't say Knave—Lancelot; King of Diamonds, Caesar; and so on. And the Jack of Diamonds—well, you can guess that now."

"Is Hector."

"Exactly. But here's our problem, now that you've brought up your point—did your telegram mean Hector, the Jack of Diamonds, in order to indicate Vinton; or does that crumpled Jack of Diamonds mean Hector, indicating your Hector Prynne? You can have it either way. And another point that comes back to me—Eteilla, the first great authority on fortune telling with cards, gives a special meaning to each card. The Jack of Diamonds means 'a selfish and deceitful relative.'"

"And Jackson pointed out that in simpler fortunetelling it means a blond young man. That, in our present group, could only be Bill Harding."

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"And still, as I told Kay, that card can't really mean anything. It has to be a plant; and if it's a plant, it must be aimed at Vinton. You see—"

"Good morning, gentlemen." It was the deep warm voice of Camilla Sallice. She set a traveling bag down in the doorway and came forward to them. She had changed, Rand thought; she seemed freer and more at ease. Not as though she had rid herself of her oppressive sense of tragedy, but as though she had found some means of making it bearable.

"Hello," Fergus greeted her. "Decided what you've got to tell us?"

"This, for the time being," she smiled with gracious melancholy. "I am leaving the house."

Rand went harrumph indignantly. "My dear young lady, at a time like this—"

"I'm sorry. I don't expect you to understand, although possibly Mr. O'Breen will." She looked at the young Irishman closely. "Yes, possibly . . . You see, I simply cannot stay here."

Fergus stood still in front of her. Their eyes met fixedly. "I can't stop you, you know. I could tell the police—though I've no idea what they'd do about it."

"I haven't told anyone else that I'm going," she went on. "It's simpler that way. But I remembered that you might need me. I don't want to hide away like a criminal. Here." She handed Fergus a slip of paper. "That is the address of my hotel. Please tell no one unless it becomes necessary." She spoke simply and quietly, but her dark voice was rich in pleading.

Fergus hesitated. Rand had the sense of witnessing a struggle not expressed in their words. "I think you are being unwise, Miss Sallice."

"I think not, Mr. O'Breen. Goodbye." She turned and gazed on Rand, as though her deep eyes could tell him what her tongue withheld. "You'll know some time," she said slowly, then added, like a tender echo of something heard long ago, "Dear Theo . . ."

She was gone. Her heady perfume fought an invisible losing battle against Rand's cigar smoke. "'Dear Theo . . .'" he repeated in a whisper.

"'Theo'?" Anything out of the ordinary caught Fergus's alert attention. "That's funny—even aside from her being so suddenly familiar. Kay always calls you 'Uncle Teddy.' That's what the Sallice would have heard."

Rand was lost in reverie. "Only one person ever called me Theo."

"And that was—?"

"Please, Mr. O'Breen. It can have nothing to do with this . . . And yet it disturbs me."

Fergus stood a moment undecided, then slipped the paper into his pocket. "Well, anyway, that's that. Now for a little chat with Hector Prynne."

The Colonel had roused himself. "First, a question, if I may, sir. Why didn't you ask Miss Sallice about the motive she thought of yesterday?"

"Because, if I'm thinking straight, that's why she's leaving here. She's thought of something that we haven't, and she's afraid her reactions might give her away if she stays here. She gave me her address expressly so that I could come and learn what her suspicion is. You see, she's read too many mystery novels in which The Person Who Knows Too Much is the second victim.

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"Look, Colonel Rand. The murderer had two purposes. One was Garnett's death. The other was Vinton's execution for that death. Everything points that way—the fingerprints, the telegram, and the Jack of Diamonds—unless anything comes of your Hector discovery. It would, I think, be a colossal mistake for the killer to commit another murder in Vinton's absence—it would only serve to draw official suspicion *away* from his victim. No, Colonel, we're safe enough here *until Vinton gets bailed out.*

"And now we'll learn the details of the second Hector. Come on, my mustachioed generalissimo."

The next five minutes were far too confused for Rand to do any straight thinking or even to be quite sure of what was happening. It all started when they reached the foot of the staircase. Rand had often used the expression, "An idea struck him," but he had never realized how literal it could be. Now he saw the young Irishman struck by an idea, and the result was astounding.

First, O'Breen stopped dead with his foot on the stair, as though he were playing Living Statues. Then he groaned like something chained in a castle dungeon and muttered, "It couldn't. No, it couldn't. By Saint Columbkill, if it has . . ." And with a hasty "Wait here!" he dashed alone up the stairs.

Then, before Rand could even try to grasp the situation, Fergus was back, and the old soldier was being hurried out the front door and into the O'Breen sedan (which matched the polo shirt).

The classical ride in the taxicab was nothing compared to this. For one thing, it was downhill. For another, no bored professional could equal an Irish amateur at reckless driving. Not until the traffic on Vermont had forced them to a quieter pace did Rand have any time for questions.

"What in the name of seven gods is this all about, young man?" he demanded with bristles on every syllable.

"Gone," Fergus said briefly.

"Willowe?"

"Yes."

"But why are we—"

"Taking it on the lam? I want to talk to the Sallice wench before she knows about it. I was wrong—dear Saint Malachi, how wrong I was! I never saw this possibility—and it was staring me in the face. The poor foolish old man! I never thought—"

"But the police—"

"Don't worry. They'll be notified all right. It isn't my place. Remember, we don't know a thing about it."

As far as he himself was concerned, Rand thought, that was certainly true enough. He gave up questioning and settled back in the seat. Willowe gone. Did that mean—? His preoccupation with the problem blinded him even to the dangers of Fergus' driving.

The hotel was opposite Westlake Park. It was a big, old place—quiet and a little dank. Rand didn't like the look of the tenants in the lobby: they were mostly superannuated dowagers or arty young men. The hotel was, in fact, a haven where the weary old and the ivory-towerish young alike sought sanctuary from the world.

"Have you got a Miss Sallice registered here?" Fergus asked the room clerk.

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"How do you spell that? Let me see . . . No, sir, I'm sorry. No one of that name here."

Rand snorted. "That's two of them gone! And you believed her little story? Yes, she'd be apt to run away and leave you her address! Why, at this very minute—"

At this very minute Camilla Sallice walked in the door of the hotel. A cab driver followed with her suitcase. She stopped abruptly on seeing the two men, then hastened toward them.

"So you got here even before I could!" she exclaimed. "I'm glad. I wanted to talk to you, and I couldn't —there. Just a moment till I register, and then—"

"Register nothing." Fergus took her arm. "We're going out in the park where it's a little more cheery and have a nice long talk. And then you'll be driving back to Garnett's with me. Here you are, buddy." He handed three bills to the driver and took the suitcase. "That ought to cover it."

Camilla smiled. "I can at least pay my own bills, Mr. O'Breen."

"That goes on my expense account. I have to have some expenses, don't I? Come on."

The O'Breen vigor was even more noticeable in the open air. Swinging the suitcase lightly and whistling fantastic variations on his father's best-loved jig, he swept the other two unresisting into the park.

"Now, Miss Sallice," he began, pausing in front of a bench and waving her to sit down.

She looked around apprehensively and caught sight of a policeman strolling nearby. "Not here," she objected. "It's too—too public."

"As though a public place wasn't the surest secrecy for private conversation."

"No. I can't. Let's go back to the hotel."

"That foul hole? Come on again."

He led her off once more. Rand followed, feeling somewhat like a highly astonished ocean liner on finding itself carried along in the wake of a motorboat.

In two minutes the three of them were in the center of the pond which is called West Lake. Fergus had scorned the put-puts which were offered him and chosen a dilapidated rowboat. "You see," he explained, "rowing's the next best thing to pacing."

He rowed in long, smooth strokes. The lake was still and glistened in the bright winter sun. Blares of bad radio bands came from the miniature motorboats which scooted around them.

"Now," Fergus began, feathering the oars deftly. "Let's have it, Miss Sallice. We're alone enough here, the saints know. Now you can tell us why you've been hiding the fact that you're Kay's half-sister. Look out—these boats rock."

Rand stared at the girl. The shot had gone home—there was no doubting that. "You mean," he spluttered, "you're Garnett's daughter?"

She shook her dark head heavily. "No," she said. "Not Uncle Humphrey's—Alicia's."

The Colonel laid his hand gently on hers. "Alicia was married before —and I never knew it?"

Her voice was almost inaudible. "No, Colonel Rand. Not married."

He looked at her silently and tightened his clasp on her hand. "I hate

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to tell you this . . . Theo," she faltered. "But you do have a—a sort of right to know. You remember, so many years ago, when you decided to —well, to be a gentleman and leave the field clear to Uncle Humphrey? What you never knew was that he did the same thing. He left Mother then too. She didn't understand. It hurt her. Both of you . . . She—she went a little wild for a while. She never told me who my father was. Whoever it was, he deserted her; she never saw him again. Her family took me away and put me in an orphanage. When Uncle Humphrey came back and proposed to her, of course they tried to keep me a secret. And while Mother was on her honeymoon, they had me moved to another place. They hated me—I was a blot on the family honor. And Mother never knew where I was."

The whole story was pouring out in soft low tones, scarcely to be heard above the radios, but rapidly and forcefully as though it did her good to be rid of her secret. Rand patted her taut hand. "Go on."

"I ran away from the orphanage. I had a frightful life for a while. I'll spare you all that. Then, when I was over eighteen and I knew they couldn't make me go back any more, I went to the orphanage to find out who my people were. Then I went to Mother's home town—I slung hash there for a while and found out enough to know that my grandparents weren't the kind of people I could go to see. But I did learn Uncle Humphrey's address in Washington, and I wrote to Mother. They were just leaving for California. I saw her in one stolen visit and oh—she was dear."

Rand blew his nose. "She was indeed, my child."

"But she didn't dare tell Uncle Humphrey about me—she was afraid of him. She used to write to me all the time and tell me about everything —that's how I knew about Theo and how much he meant to her. And she sent me money, but it wasn't always enough. And anyhow I'd started off wrong; it wasn't so easy to stop. Then I didn't get any more letters from her. And one day a man in the dive asked for me and said he was Humphrey Garnett.

"I was scared. I didn't know what he wanted. Then it seemed he'd found my letters to Mother after her death, and he'd traced me. He'd learned from those letters what he'd never suspected—that sometimes he was too harsh with Mother. And he wanted to make up to her through me. He did, and I loved him for it."

Her story was finished, and the tears she had struggled so hard to keep back now overpowered her. Rand tried clumsily to console her: she was part of Alicia.

Fergus rested on his oars. "Thank you, Miss Sallice." His natural brashness sounded a bit dimmed. "I'm sorry to have caused you this pain, but you can see that we have to know everything." He paused a moment. "Look here. Isn't anybody going to say, 'But how on earth did you know that?' "

Camilla smiled a little through her tears. "Dear Mr. O'Breen. You're so self-effacing, aren't you?" Fergus had the grace to look uncomfortable. "All right. I was surprised, and it all came over me so I couldn't even think. How on earth *did* you know?"

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"Thanks. It's no use being a detective unless you can explain how good you are. I simply put together four things: The quarrel over your mother, the Colonel's reticence about the name 'Theo,' the sudden change in Arthur Willowe's attitude toward you, and the fact that I once took botany."

"Botany?" Rand demanded.

"The willow is of the genus *Salix*. When a mysterious girl named Sallice is tangled up with a family named Willowe, it looks like more than a coincidence."

"You *are* clever. I changed my name because it sounded better in night clubs, and besides they always called me Willowe at the orphanage, till I hated the sound of it."

Fergus was rowing hard again. "I suppose all this is what you told Arthur Willowe last night?"

"Yes."

"When did you see him last?"

"Then."

"You didn't see him this morning?"

"No. I told him last night that I was leaving. I didn't get up this morning until just before you saw me. I knew he'd be taking his nap then, so I didn't say goodbye."

"Right. And now, what's this Hector Prynne business?"

Camilla Sallice frowned. It was an attractive frown, Rand thought—everything about her seemed more attractive since he had learned the truth. It was partly the association with Alicia, but it seemed as though her somber, almost sinister quality had been purged by her confession.

"I—I don't think I ought to tell you that, Mr. O'Breen," Camilla said. "I know I shouldn't like it if Mr. Willowe—if Uncle Arthur, I suppose I can say now—were to tell you my secret without my permission."

"But look, Miss Sallice. It's something we have to know."

"Then why not ask him?"

Fergus feathered the oars again, which seemed to fascinate a swan drifting by. "Let me assure you, there are grave reasons why we cannot ask him."

Rand looked as perplexed as the swan. He regarded Camilla closely. The sun was bright and warm, but she shuddered.

"Oh," she gasped. "Then I was right!"

"What do you mean?"

"What I thought last night—what I wouldn't tell you—what I thought you came here to ask me until we began talking about—about me."

"You mean this notion you had of a possible motive?"

She nodded reluctantly. "It struck me all of a sudden last night. That's why I went to talk to Uncle Arthur and tell him all about me. I thought if that was true he'd show it when he learned the real truth and saw how terribly wrong he'd been. And now you—"

"How did he take your story?"

"He—he did seem confused by it. And then very sorry. But he was so nice. I thought then I understood him, poor dear helpless old man that he is. But do you really think—?"

"Just what are you driving at, Miss Sallice?"

"Why, that he must have thought I was—that I'd taken Alicia's place with Uncle Humphrey. Bodily, I mean. Uncle Arthur loved her so much—he would have been terribly

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jealous. He and Uncle Humphrey hated each other anyway. That would have been enough to—"

She halted. A direct accusation of murder was apparently more than she could bring herself to utter.

Fergus pursued his advantage. "Then you can see how very important it is for us to know everything we can about him. So tell us—why did he say, 'I am Hector Prynne'?"

Camilla laughed nervously. "But that's so silly. It can't have anything to do with—with anything."

"Tell us anyway," Rand urged, still somewhat puzzled by this whole Willowe situation. If the man had planned to incriminate Vinton for some strange reason, why should he flee now when his planted suspect was safely under arrest?

"I think he just wanted to show his confidence in me—give secret for secret. You understand, don't you? So since he knew who I really was, he told me who he was. But what difference can that make?"

Fergus was rowing so eagerly that he just missed ramming a tiny island. "Go on."

"Well, you see, Uncle Humphrey wasn't very generous to Arthur about money. Not that there was any reason why he should be—Arthur didn't feel any resentment about that. But he used to want money to give Mother occasionally—he didn't know that it was to send to me, but he trusted her in anything. He was old to get a job, he'd failed in business, and he didn't know how to get money. So he tried writing."

"I've known guys who did that," Fergus observed. "Six months, and they were glad to get any job."

"He tried everything, writing secretly in his room. He couldn't make what he called 'the slicks,' so he tried the pulp magazines. He wrote detective stories and horror stories and sport stories—and I don't think he'd ever seen a football game or a prize-fight in his life—and they all came back. Then he finally clicked in the off-color magazines—you know the things like *Naughty Nights* and *Risky Revels*. He went on and did some sexy novels for rental libraries. I read one once—it was really shocking."

"He must have had great faith in his imagination," Rand grunted.

"He's sold quite a few things, but he's never dared tell anyone. He wanted to tell Uncle Humphrey just to prove that he could do something, but he was afraid that sort of thing might seem worse than not doing anything at all. So that was his secret."

"And he wrote under the name of Hector Prynne?"

"Yes."

"Did Mr. Garnett ever learn about this?"

"No."

"How can you be so sure?"

"You know what Uncle Humphrey was like. If he ever had learned, he'd have been sure to taunt the poor old man about it. The chance would have been too good to waste."

"Did anyone else know?"

"Uncle Arthur said I was the first person to know his secret. He used to get his Hector Prynne mail at a post-office box. There wasn't any way for anyone to know."

Fergus had been maneuvering the boat to the dock. Now with a long pull he sent it straight at the waiting attendant.

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"One more item for the expense account," he said as he paid off. "Now come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Back to the house. Jackson ought to be there by now."

Camilla grew pale. "You mean the detective Lieutenant? Why should he be there?"

"Sorry. Minor slip. Forget I said it. No, on second thought you'd better know. It might lessen the shock. You see, Colonel, when I told you Willowe was 'gone,' I was just using a popular euphemism. Arthur Willowe has been murdered."

It was Rand's old friend Number One who greeted them at the door. Camilla shivered and seemed to grow small as she looked at the uniform; but Fergus was as brash as ever.

"What's all this, my stout fellow?" he demanded. "More crimes on the premises?"

"How'd you guess, wise guy?" Number One growled. "I think the Lieutenant wants to see you. No, not you." He waved Camilla aside.

"That's all right, Colonel," said Fergus with calm assurance. "I'm certain the Lieutenant wants to see you too. Come on. See you later, Miss Sallice—and thank you."

Rand looked back as they went down the hall. Camilla seemed terribly alone and forlorn in this house of death. With pity for her in his heart, he turned to see Number One glaring at him. "Well, at least you're sober this time," the policeman said.

Jackson was in the study again. He was alone and seemed badly worried. He looked up as the men entered and snapped, "You're O'Breen?"

"Lieutenant, I am The O'Breen."

"All right. Now we'll get somewhere."

Fergus smiled. "Anything you say, Lieutenant."

"Where have you been?"

"The Sallice girl moved out this morning. I remembered some questions I had to ask her, so I went and asked them. I persuaded her to come back with me."

"How did you know where she'd gone? Nobody in this house seemed to have the least idea."

"I found a piece of paper beside the telephone with a number jotted on it in what looked like her handwriting. I thought she might have been calling a hotel about reservations, so I checked it."

"And pocketed the paper just to make things easier for us?"

"How was I to know you'd be coming out here? Which reminds me, Lieutenant, I still don't know what brings you here—unless it's revisiting the scene of the crime."

Jackson looked at him shrewdly. "I've heard of you, O'Breen. That was good work you did in that arson case, and I've heard rumors about the way you put a stop to Rita La Marr's blackmailer. I wish I knew just where you stood in this business—with us or against us."

Fergus was pacing at a temperate rate—apparently a partial concession to the presence of authority. "I'll be frank with you. I think you picked the wrong man when you arrested Vinton, and I'm trying to prove him innocent—maybe you'll call that working against you. But on the other hand, I'm trying to find the real murderer—and the saints know that

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should be working with you. You can call it either way. It might be simpler to flip a coin."

The Lieutenant leaned back. "All right. I'll be frank too. We're together on both counts."

Colonel Rand started. "On both?"

"Yes, Colonel. Vinton was released on bail this morning. He's here in the house now—got here just after we did. And I can tell you confidentially that there's very little danger of the charges being pressed unless we learn something new and startling. That fingerprint business alone would give a good defense attorney—and Max Farrington is that—one honey of a chance to poke holes in our case."

Fergus paused in mid-stride. "All right. If we're working together, why not tell us just what's happened to bring you here?"

Jackson regarded him for a long minute. "I wish I knew," he said slowly, "whether I need to tell you this. But here goes. Arthur Willowe has been murdered."

For Rand's taste, Fergus's reaction of surprise was just a little overplayed. The Colonel himself made no attempt at bluffing; Jackson wasn't watching him.

"Yes, Mr. O'Breen, murdered. As you probably know, Willowe took a nap every day at eleven o'clock on a cot on his balcony. He slept in the room itself—that cot was used only by him and only for these morning naps. It seems an odd arrangement, but nothing surprises me in this household. Anyway, the point is, everybody knew about this habit of his. While he was sleeping there this morning, somebody stuck a needle dipped in poison in the back of his neck."

"Just a minute, Lieutenant. Was that poison in Garnett's laboratory?"

The Lieutenant groaned. "Everything's in that laboratory, O'Breen. I never saw such a hellish collection. And in a way this second death is my own fault. I should have sealed up that laboratory yesterday. But Harding insisted he had work to do, so I let him go ahead."

"As long as we're being frank, Lieutenant, do you know who killed Willowe?"

"I'm hanged if I even know *why* he was killed, let alone who did it. Unless, of course, he knew something about Garnett's death. He seems the most inoffensively useless man I've ever encountered. And who was in the house? His niece, who seems devoted to him; the laboratory assistant, who had nothing at all to do with him; the cook, who's out of the question; and you two." He checked himself. "When did Miss Sallice leave?"

"A little after eleven."

"And Miss Sallice, then. Though the Lord knows where she comes in. It looks as though his death must tie in some way with Garnett's, but still —"

"And Vinton?" Rand asked.

"Vinton's accounted for. He left the jail with his lawyer, went on to Farrington's office, and got out here after we did. Even if Farrington's pulling a fake alibi for him, the time element lets him out. He couldn't possibly have got here before Miss Garnett's call came in to us."

"One more frank question, Lieutenant." Fergus paused dramatically. "Were you ever center on the U.S.C. basketball team?"

Jackson jerked back in amazement,

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then burst into a hearty laugh. "Good Lord! Fergus O'Breen, the Fighting Forward—the man who made thirteen baskets in the U.S.C.—Loyola game!"

Fergus stretched out his hands. "Hiya, Andy!"

For a moment Rand was afraid things were going to turn into a contest of sporting memories. He was relieved to find that he was wrong. Both men were still deeply concerned with the business in hand.

"The personal touch helps," Jackson smiled. "I'd just about resolved to pool information with you anyway, and when I remember the time you were practically a one-man team and licked the bejabbers out of us, that decides me. Which doesn't make any official sense, but that's the way it works sometimes. Now get me straight, Fergus: I want you to play ball with me."

"Back to the good old days again?".

"Cut the gags. We've each got an advantage. I've got the force of authority and the efficiency of routine behind me. You're on a more or less personal footing with all these people and have a confidential in. Between us, we ought to get some place. Now if we could—"

Fergus caught his sideways glance. "Brush up on your mystery novels, Andy. What's a detective without a faithful Watson? Colonel Rand's been in on this with me from the start. He might as well stay on."

Jackson turned to Rand. "I must admit I took the trouble of checking your arrival at the airport. Since that eliminates you from the list of possible suspects, if you're interested in sitting in on our conference—"

"I most assuredly am."

"Very well. Now perhaps the first point I should mention—you see I really am trusting you and going ahead with our own information first—is the will. Mr. Harding tells me he showed you the carbon copy. That, unfortunately, is most misleading. Yes?"

The "Yes?" was directed at the door, where there was a noise which might have been either a knock or a scuffle. No answer came. Jackson had risen and was about to investigate when the door burst open and Harding struggled into the room, despite the restraining efforts of Number One.

Even before the young assistant spoke, it was clear to Rand that he was very drunk indeed. This was a surprise—he had seemed such an abnormally quiet and respectable young man, not even a smoker, much less an early-afternoon lush. The drinks had given him strength—the way he dragged the husky Number One after him showed that.

The two men spoke at once, Harding in drunken indignation and Number One in apology for disturbing his superior.

"Let him go, Mac," Jackson said sharply. "As long as he got in here, we might as well hear what he has to say. Well, what's it all about, Harding?"

Released from the official grasp, Harding subsided abruptly. "It doesn't matter," he mumbled thickly. "There isn't a rotten thing that matters any more."

"Come on. Out with it. You came in here to tell me something. What is it?"

Harding smiled with bacchic cun-

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ning. "You wouldn't be underested."

"Underested?"

He shook his head slowly. "You wouldn't interstand."

Fergus laughed. "Go on, Andy. He wants to be coaxed."

"I'll coax him all right! Would you sooner have the boys take you outside and talk it over?" he demanded abruptly. Number One looked as though the idea appealed to him.

Harding shook his finger waggishly. "Ah—ah, lieutenant! That's naughty. That's the third degree, that's what that's—what that is. The courts don't like it. No-o-o-o-o! But you're a nice fellow. I'll tell you. Only the trouble is, you like him."

"Like who?"

Drinking had brought out fresh aspects of Harding only dimly hinted at by his limericks of the day before. He launched forth now into a description of Richard Vinton couched in terms which would have made Jeeter Lester blush. It was not an edifying spectacle, but it somehow increased Rand's respect for the young man. He wasn't just milk-and-water after all: there was guts to him.

He paused finally, and Fergus burst into loud applause. The display, Rand admitted, deserved it.

"Well, what about Vinton?"

"I'll tell you what about Vinton. You turned him loose again, didn't you? You think he's a nice sweet Good Little Boy, don't you? Well, I'll tell you what about Vinton! I'll—"

He pulled a folded newspaper out of his pocket and stood for a moment brandishing it in the air. He looked at once terribly dramatic and painfully ludicrous. Then all his force seemed to desert him.

"Aw, the hell with it," he muttered, dropped the newspaper on the floor, and left the room, followed by the still badly perplexed Number One.

"Picturesque interlude," Fergus observed. "Now just what do you think all that means?"

"Simple enough," Rand said. "He's jealous of Vinton. Seeing him and Kay together again got on his nerves. So he got drunk and made a fool of himself. It needn't mean any more."

But Jackson was studying the newspaper. "It's this morning's paper," he said, "folded to the theatrical section. What that could—just a minute. Here's a paragraph marked." He read slowly:

> The creditors of what screen juvenile are rejoicing at his arrest on suspicion of murder, because the publicity will mean the formerly very doubtful renewal of his contract.

Fergus whistled. "I thought our little Richard was bigtime."

"You never can tell. Once you start slipping, you slip fast. That is a shrewd point: if he's cleared of all blame and scandal, the publicity will make him an invaluable property to his studio. A while ago this extra motive, if you can call it that, might have helped us; now it's just a nuisance. The fingerprints clear him on Garnett, and he couldn't possibly have killed Willowe."

"But it does show," Rand put in, "that Harding is exceedingly anxious to incriminate him."

"Yes . . ."

"But to get back to the facts of death," Fergus broke in. "Look, Andy. You were going to tell us about that will."

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"Yes. As I was starting to say, there were two codicils. One was made two years ago—just after Alicia Garnett's death in the accident. It canceled the legacy to Arthur Willowe, and turned that ten thousand dollars over to Harding for purposes of research."

"And the other?"

"About a year ago. It leaves twenty thousand dollars to Camilla Sallice, on the condition that she continue her singing studies."

"Anything else to tell us?"

"Minor routine items. There's no doubt, for instance, that the poison was administered to Garnett in that whiskey. We analyzed the few drops left in the glass. And about that glass—there are smudges, possibly glove marks, over Vinton's fingerprints, which was to be expected. And those fingerprints—another thing that made us suspicious of a frame—are exceptionally clear, much more so than you'd expect from a casual handling—they even show a portion of the palm which we can identify by the pore markings."

"Anything more about Willowe's death?"

"We identified the needle—it's the same as several that are stuck in a pincushion in Miss Garnett's room. I suppose anybody could have slipped in there and taken it. One out of six or eight wouldn't be missed."

"Of course. All pretty inconclusive, isn't it?"

Jackson shrugged. "So far, I admit. But remember we're still working. Now let's hear what you've found out."

Rand leaned back and watched the smoke of his cigar while Fergus told the results of their endeavors—Garnett's secret researches, Harding's violent pacifism, the story of Camilla Sallice, and the possible double meaning of Hector.

Lieutenant Jackson listened with sharp interest. "So," he observed as Fergus paused. "You've done good work. Is that all?"

Fergus nodded. "That's all. Now have you any questions to ask—of me or anybody else—before I go on to explain who was the murderer?"

Jackson frowned. "Aren't you going a little fast, Fergus? Or is this one of the famous O'Breen ribs?"

"I know. You think I'm bluffing. Well, I'm not. I'm perfectly ready to explain the whole thing here and now. But look. You know me, and you know I'm young and Irish. That means I'm theatrical. So how's about helping me out?"

"What do you mean—helping you out?"

"Call the gang together and let me expound my solution with all the trimmings. You know, if they but blench, I'll know my cause. Not that I need that, but it does make things picturesque."

The Lieutenant looked at him for a puzzled moment. Then he grinned. "All right. It's a tomfool idea, and I've got a terrible fear that you might make an idiot of yourself. But go ahead—so long as it's understood this isn't official. Now who do you want?"

"The whole kit and kaboodle. The three of us, of course. Kay. The Sallice. Harding—if we can sober him up. Vinton. Might as well drag in Farrington if we can get him."

"He's here now. Came with Vinton."

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"Fine. Can you round them up for me?"

"That's simple. They're all here in the house. Where do you want to hold your little séance?"

"The sun porch. Light and freedom. Clear thinking. Daylight and champaign discovers not more. And when an O'Breen quotes Shakespeare, that means, in classical language, that all hell's about to bust loose."

Rand puffed his cigar in confusion. Like the Lieutenant, he feared that Fergus was being overconfident, that his rashness was leading him to a promise he might find hard to fulfill. Surely on this contrarily insufficient and oversufficient evidence . . .

They had just left the study when Kay Garnett came running up to them. The series of shocks, Rand noted with sorrow, was beginning to tell on her. Her face (so much like Alicia's) was losing its bright freshness and becoming drawn and tired. She was sobbing now, and it was hard to know just what she said.

She took refuge in Colonel Rand's fatherly arms. "Oh, do something," he could hear her sob faintly. "You must do something! Now!"

"We are about to, my dear. Fergus tells us—"

"No. Not that. Bill . . ." Her voice trailed off for a moment. Then she said, "Camilla says he'll be all right, but I don't believe it. You've got to do something!"

"What's the matter with Harding?" Jackson interposed. "Just because he was fool enough to get drunk—"

"It's not that, Lieutenant. Oh, you've got to get somebody. Now! He's just taken poison."

"He'll pull through," the hastily recalled police doctor assured them. "Tricky stuff, that bichloride of mercury. A small dose can kill you, and a large one may make you just deathly sick. It acts as an emetic and forestalls its own toxic effect. I'm leaving a male nurse with him—he'll see to everything. I wouldn't talk to him for a while yet."

"Well," said Jackson after the doctor had left, "I guess that clears things up without your big scene, Fergus. It looks pretty obvious. In the first place, this was an attempt at suicide beyond any doubt, and not another murder. Miss Garnett herself was looking for him, worried because he was so drunk, and stepped into the laboratory just in time to see him swallow the stuff."

Fergus smiled almost patronizingly. "Go on, Andy."

"There's nothing to go on about. He had all the motive you could ask for. Garnett's death gave him ten thousand dollars and, according to his lights, freed the world of a monster who was creating war poisons. Incriminating Vinton, if it had worked, would have left Kay free for him. That didn't work, and the failure took all the glory out of his crime. When he learned we'd released Vinton, he went to pieces, drank himself practically out of his mind, made one last attempt at accusing Vinton to us, saw it didn't go down, and gave up. But he was so drunk he poured himself too large a dose, so we'll have him on trial after all."

"The drunkenness, I suppose, had something to do with increasing the emetic effect?" Rand asked.

"Yes, Colonel. That sounds likely."

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"And why did he kill Willowe?" Fergus's voice was unusually tense.

"I can't read his mind for you. I suppose because of something Willowe knew that would give him away. He might have seen him taking the acid from the laboratory—"

"Come on, Andy. That's out of a novel. *Why did he kill Willowe?"*

"I'll admit I'd like to know. We'll probably get it out of him, officially speaking, but it isn't important. He'll be tried probably for only the first crime. Now that the case is closed, Fergus, I'd like to know just how you had it figured out."

"Look, Andy. Can't you be a good guy? I mean, if I make an idiot of myself, there's nobody to blame but me, is there?"

"False accusations can mean suits for malicious slander."

"I know that. It doesn't worry me. I'll take the chance. But let me go through with the scene as planned, without Harding in the cast. We can make shift without him. Then if I lay an egg, you can take Harding away and go merrily along and just plain forget my fiasco."

"Let him have his chance, Lieutenant," Rand urged. "You'll admit your case against Harding isn't air-tight. He may have something of value in this plan of his."

"I guess," said Jackson reluctantly, "that in a town where they make movies, anything goes. Next thing I'll probably be drinking on a case, or smoking Régie cigarettes. All right, Fergus, you can stage your grand finale. But it had better be good."

Fergus grinned broadly. "Shure, me bhoy, but I'm afther tellin' ye it will be."

Lieutenant Jackson looked around the sun porch at the assembled company. "I warn you," he began, "this is all strictly unofficial."

Rand followed his gaze. Unless Fergus' impetuous Irish brilliance had sorely misled him, here in this group was a murderer. It was hard to believe.

He marveled, as he looked around, how much these people had changed since the time of the first crime. Kay looked older and much sadder. Camilla, despite her sorrow, seemed happier. Vinton, freed at last from the cloud of suspicion, seemed another man; it wasn't only his bravado now —he looked strong and right. Rand could find it in his heart to forgive the chap for being an actor.

Max Farrington spoke up suavely. "Since the police seem inclined to regret their unfortunate mistake in arresting my client, I see no reason why we should not cooperate with you."

"It isn't so much a question of cooperating with *me,* Mr. Farrington, as with your boy detective here." Fergus winced. "Bringing him in on this case was your own idea, remember —though I don't say it wasn't a good one. I don't know what hand grenade of deduction he's going to toss into your midst now, but I'll admit I'm deeply interested. And I request you —quite unofficially, I repeat—to listen to what he has to say and to answer any questions he may ask you."

Fergus rose and resumed his walkathon. "With that formal introduction, I feel like an after-dinner speaker —which reminds me that in all this hectic day we haven't had any lunch. And I ought to start out with, 'Unaccustomed as I am . . .' Which, as a

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matter of fact, is quite true. I'm not accustomed to murders, and I know I haven't got the right attitude. I don't mean to be flippant, but that's the way I am. It's worked before in other things; I've been flippant as all get-out explaining to a plush dowager that she really couldn't expect me to be interested in chasing her paste emeralds when the real ones were inside a roll of cotton in the medicine cabinet. But this is different, and so, to use another formula from after-dinner speaking, 'I ask your indulgence' if I sound too light once in a while. I'm really sorry as hell it all happened.

"Now that those formalities are off my fine red-haired chest, I want to ask a few questions. Mr. Vinton."

"Yes?"

"Did you at any time have in your hand the glass from which Mr. Garnett—well, that glass," he added quietly after a glance at Kay's drawn face.

"Often, I suppose. But not on that night."

"Did you return to the study at all that night?"

"No." He spoke simply and convincingly. Kay looked at him with warmth and relief; having her fiancé back with her seemed the only bright spot in her present life.

"All right. I just wanted to make sure. You see, that could have provided another explanation. Now Miss Sallice."

Camilla smiled at him; she seemed satisfied that matters were in good hands now. "Yes, Mr. O'Breen?"

"Look. Before we go on, would you tell all these people just what you told me in the rowboat this morning? I think it might ease their minds a little."

Camilla told her story briefly. Farrington looked bored, Vinton mildly interested, and Kay deeply sympathetic.

"You poor child," she said when the other girl had finished. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Uncle Humphrey didn't want me to. He was possessive, you know. I think he wanted to know that there was one part of his wife left that no one could share with him."

There was a little pause, broken by Fergus again saying, "Mr. Vinton."

Vinton shrugged. "I thought I was through with this sort of thing for a while. But go on, Mr. O'Breen. Glad to help you if I can."

"I don't want to seem to be digging up your past. We all know you've gone straight, and we don't want to hold your shipboard activities against you. But I've got to ask this: was there any chance that Mr. Garnett knew what you had been?"

Vinton was puzzled. "That's hard to say. Acting a part isn't so easy in life as it is on the stage or screen. There you've got the author's lines to go on, and as long as you're a good study with some talent it's smooth sailing. But in real life you have to make up your own lines, and it's easy to slip now and then. I know I did slip occasionally, and I think Mr. Garnett noticed it. I've seen him look at me strangely from time to time. So all I can say is that he *may* have known who I was."

"Now one more question, and we go to work in real earnest. Client?"

Kay tried to smile. It wasn't much use. "Yes, Detective?"

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"You said your father had heart trouble. How soon would that have been likely to prove fatal?"

"Dr. Warriner said he couldn't be sure, but he did warn Father it might be within a few months."

"Who else knew this?"

"I remember Father told us about it one evening when we were all sitting in the study. He seemed almost pleased, as though he had a strong new adversary now. Camilla and Bill and Uncle Arthur were all there."

"And you, Mr. Vinton?"

"I don't remember whether Kay told me, or Mr. Garnett himself. At any rate, I knew about it."

"Fine. Now we can go to town. Let's start out by looking for the motive that must have been behind the whole business. That means a complex *triple* motive, and I don't think we'll find many people it could fit. In fact, I doubt if you'll find more than one.

"The first essential of this crime was Garnett's death. Now who profits by that? Kay, of course, as residuary legatee. Miss Sallice, for twenty thousand dollars. Did you know about that?"

"Yes. Uncle Humphrey told me when he changed the will."

"Bill Harding," Fergus went on, "for ten thousand. According to his own comments on reading the outdated carbon, he hadn't known definitely but had expected some sizable bequest for his researches. Also, if he had known about the true meaning of Garnett's secret research—he could have learned it earlier by accident and then staged a big surprise scene for my benefit—this would have added a fanatical hate to his motive, and made it murder for profit and conviction at once. And Mr. Vinton's motives have been subjected to enough scrutiny already.

"There's one flaw, however, about all the motives that depend on the will. None of the suspects was in urgent and instant financial need, and all of them knew about Garnett's heart. If the motive was *just* money, the murderer should have been willing to wait a few months and see if the legacy tumbled into his lap as a gift from the gods.

"Now we come to the second essential of the crime—the framing of Richard Vinton. We can't doubt that such a frame was planned. The fingerprints, which seemed at first so convincing, are now Vinton's best proof of innocence. That glass was wiped, or it would have shown Garnett's own prints and Miss Sallice's; and no murderer is going to polish up a nice bright surface just to leave an unusually clear sample of his own prints. I thought possibly that Vinton might have been inveigled into handling the glass some time that evening after the other prints have been wiped off it—I mean, of course, before the murder, because it was handled later by someone with gloves.

"Vinton's own evidence, however, disposes of that idea. The only posible conclusion is that the fingerprints were forged with a stamp. Lieutenant Jackson has pointed out that they were far more clearly and regularly imprinted than you'd expect from ordinary handling. And despite all the popular ideas on the subject, the forging of fingerprints is entirely possible. Check, Lieutenant?"

Jackson nodded. "It can be done."

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"But there's even more convincing evidence of a frame-up, and that's the Jack of Diamonds which was supposed to be the dying man's accusation of his murderer. An accidental false trail from this card led us to Arthur Willowe, but disregarding that we see that it must refer to the notorious episode on the Cunarder. And that ties in with the telegram, another part of the frame, and its reference to a mysterious 'Hector.' Hector is the name of the Jack of Diamonds in the French pack.

"Now the effect was supposed to be this: Garnett realizes he's been poisoned. He wants to leave a message which will proclaim his murderer's identity. He's already too far gone to write, so his lightning mind thinks of the Jack of Diamonds, which will mean 'Vinton-Massey' to Colonel Rand, and he grabs it. But the flaw here is that the pack from which the card was taken was not disarranged. That pack was sorted in suits and order, so that he couldn't just grab the top card, see it was the one he wanted, and let it go at that. He'd have had to burrow down to find it. But still that deck was stacked in perfect order.

"So we can see that the crime was aimed at Richard Vinton just as much as at the ostensible victim, Humphrey Garnett. But how about the third objective—the death of Arthur Willowe? The Lieutenant here can't think of anything better, so he says that Willowe was killed because, as they say in the classics, He Knew Too Much. Now I doubt that, but it's something you can't prove either way. If Willowe did learn something by accident, only he and his murderer knew what it was. But let me point out this: in hearing of the Lieutenant's candidate, Miss Sallice said she had ideas of her own which she was afraid to tell me until she'd slept on them. And she did sleep, and nothing happened to her. I think the only reason the Lieutenant holds on to this motive for Willowe's death is that he knows none of you had any other reason for wishing the poor old man out of the way.

"But," said Fergus theatrically, "I still claim that his death was an essential part of the whole plot. By now, in this brief summary, we've learned a lot about the murderer. One: he wanted Humphrey Garnett dead, and for some reason beyond a legacy. Two: he wanted Richard Vinton disgraced and put out of the way, preferably for good and all. Three: he knew the poisonous contents of the laboratory. Four: he knew Vinton's past. Five: he wanted the death of Arthur Willowe. Six: he had the intricate mind which could conceive and carry out an elaborate plot, and the orderly mind which would automatically straighten up the deck from which he'd taken a card.

"Does any of you recognize that description?"

Rand looked around the circle. There was nervous apprehension on every face, but no expression of guilt. It was the terror of wondering on whom the blow would fall. Jackson and Farrington seemed completely captured by the power of Fergus' reasoning.

"There is one person in this household," Fergus resumed, "and only one, of whom all six of those things can be said."

Rand could stand it no longer. He

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brought forth his loudest harrumph and shouted, "Young man, will you come to the point?"

"Gladly, Colonel Rand." But Fergus could not resist one more brief pause. "That one person is—was Humphrey Garnett."

"Hand grenade," Rand thought, was decidedly an understatement to describe this revelation. For a moment the entire group was paralyzed with shock. Then they all began talking at once.

Kay: "Not Father! He never could have—"

Camilla: "Uncle Humphrey! I don't believe—"

Vinton: "By Jove, O'Breen, I think you've been hit!"

Max Farrington: "Brilliant, O'Breen!"

Lieutenant Jackson waited for a silence. Then he said, "Go on, Fergus. I'm reserving judgment. How about a little reconstruction now?"

"All right. Look. Here's how I size it up. Garnett puts together all of Vinton's accidental slippings-out-of-character and adds them to Colonel Rand's narrative of old Vantage and the card-sharp. He resolves that a daughter of his shall never marry such a man. But, he reasons, she seems to love the fellow very dearly. If he just ups and forbids the banns, she'll say, 'Father, I defy you!' and marry him anyway.

"Of course, he can cut them off from his fortune; but so far as he knows, Vinton is making good money in pictures and that wouldn't stop the match. Besides, he wouldn't want to alter his will until he knew definitely that Kay would disobey him; and the very shock of her defiance might kill him, with his weak heart, and then Vinton would get the money anyway.

"This point—I'm getting a little novelistic here in my reconstruction, but it still makes sense—reminds him that he has to die very soon at any rate; so he conceives this devilish idea of turning his imminent death against Vinton. He works out the whole scheme—the telegram, the playing card, the fingerprints. Then he realizes the danger that someone might see through it. How much more convincing the whole thing will be if there are two murders! Then no one will think the first one might be suicide.

"He's always had a complete contempt for Arthur Willowe. It doesn't matter a whit to him whether the ineffectual little man lives or dies. And if his death can be made to serve a purpose—so Willowe gets chosen as the second victim. Sometime on the afternoon before his own death, Garnett sticks that poison-tipped needle in the pillow on his brother-in-law's couch. He knows that Willowe won't lie down there until the scheduled time for his nap the *next* morning—long after Garnett himself will be dead. With luck, he counts on the needle doing just what it did do—sticking into the skin and being lifted out of the pillow when Arthur rolls over in death, so that it looks as though somebody snuck up and pricked him with it. What he doesn't count on is the fact that Willowe is bound to be caught up in the police investigation and not get a chance to use his napping couch until the next day, when Richard Vinton is no longer a possible suspect.

"That was one of Garnett's three serious slips. The other two happen

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when he makes his preparations that night. After he picks out the Jack of Diamonds from the pack, he automatically and unconsciously straightens the pack up again. And he's so eager to make the forged fingerprints clear that he wipes all the others off the glass first. But he thinks he has the stage all set to represent himself being murdered by Vinton. If a poison container were found anywhere near the body, that might start people thinking 'suicide,' so he takes the glass to the laboratory and pours the poison in there. Then he comes back to the study and drinks his death.

"He knows that Kay might marry a reformed rascal despite her father's command; but he's sure she'll never marry a man who seems to be her father's murderer. He's solved his dilemma by merely shoving his death ahead a month or two, and incidentally he's worked out a problem which must have made his intricate mind happier than a game of four-handed chess."

Fergus halted and looked at Jackson. "Well, Andy?"

Jackson spoke slowly. "I hate to admit it, Fergus, but I'm convinced. I don't know how much luck I'll have convincing my superiors, but I do know this: in the hands of a good defense attorney, with you on the stand as expert witness, this story would get a sure-fire acquittal for anyone we might want to arrest. And that's enough for me."

Fergus was beaming; in his pleasure at having solved the case he had quite forgotten his dutifully conceived idea of appropriate sorrow. Vinton looked frankly relieved that the ordeal was at an end. Kay seemed torn between joy at the end of all the suspense, and horror at this frightful picture of her father.

"Just one more question," Jackson said. "If Harding's innocent—and you've convinced me that he is—why did he try to kill himself?"

"That makes sense all right. First, you see, his idealistic illusions had been shattered. The great man he'd served so loyally had proved to be a fiend in his off-hours. Then he learns that Kay still loves Vinton, and when he sees them together after Vinton's release, it's more than he can stand. He isn't used to drink, and after a few shots he couldn't control his emotions any more. The whole thing overwhelmed him, and he want off the deep end. Object lesson to teetotalers."

"The poor boy," Kay whispered with deep sympathy.

Fergus surveyed his audience. "Any more questions?"

Rand tossed his cigar away. "Yes, Mr. O'Breen. One."

"Fire away, Colonel."

"Why, with all your ingenuity, did you name the wrong man?"

Fergus stared at the Colonel. For once he was motionless and speechless. This wasn't in the script. No decent self-respecting Watson had ever asked a detective a question like that.

Jackson took over. "Explain yourself, Colonel," he commanded.

Rand paused and went harrumph. He was embarrassed at taking the limelight like this. He addressed himself to Fergus. "You know, young man, you are basically a first-rate detective. You unearthed a lot of valuable facts and you made some amaz-

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ingly shrewd deductions. But you see, *that was exactly what the murderer wanted you to do.*"

Fergus was on the defensive now. "Okay," he said briefly. "Show me the flaws."

This sudden turn of events had brought confusion to the assembly. All eyes were now on Rand. He fumbled for a fresh cigar and tried to make himself clear. "There are no flaws—up to a point. Your description of the murderer is exact—his motives, his desires, the quirks of his mind. I was following your every step. And I have rarely been so amazed as when you told us his name. Because, you see, there is *one other person* to whom all six qualifications apply equally well."

"Who?" Fergus demanded.

"You credited Garnett with three serious slips," Rand went on. "That was where you went wrong. Those three things were *not* slips—*they were an essential part of the plan.* The wiping of the glass and the stacking of the cards were necessary, and the murderer had clearly and accurately foreseen that Arthur Willowe would not have a chance to take a nap that morning. As a matter of fact, the only slips the murderer did make *were* connected with the glass and the card; but you failed to notice them. It's a pity after you were right on so many counts."

"Hang it, you're as melodramatic as I am!" Fergus protested. "Come to the point!"

But the Colonel was prolonging his denunciation, not because it was more theatrical, but because he couldn't make up his mind. He loved Kay very dearly; it was hard to look at her and go on with his story. But duty is a concept clearly defined in the military; with a deep puff and a deeper harrumph he resumed his explanation.

"You see," he said, "I too figured out this suicide-murder frame-up idea. We were supposed to. But what convinced me I was wrong was the card—the Knave of Diamonds. It was not, as you, young man, supposed, from an ordinary deck, although it looked modern in design. You must remember that the design of playing cards has altered almost not at all in the past hundred years, since the introduction of the double-headed court cards. And remember, too, that when I looked at that deck I observed, 'The Stars and Bars.' For that was its design—the flag of the Confederate States of America. In other words, it was one of the decks manufactured, probably in England, for that short-lived nation. They are not common, these Confederate decks; this was definitely a collector's item."

Rand was surprised at his own volubility. He had been out of practice for so long. Pleased, he went on. "Now I know the collector's mind. I am something of a collector myself—firearms is my line. And I know that the items in anyone's collection are sacred to the collector. Remember that Humphrey Garnett wore gloves whenever he touched his precious cards, and that he had willed his collection to a museum. No matter what villainous scheme he had evolved, it could not conceivably have entailed the mutilation of any part of his collection. If he had wanted to leave a clue by crumpling a Knave of Diamonds, he must inevitably have chosen one from an ordinary pack, of which there were several in the room. This rank vandal-

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ism—from a collector's point of view—was morally impossible to him. Someone else must have chosen that card."

"How?" Fergus demanded.

"If I may indulge in your method of novelistic reconstruction, what probably happened is this: Garnett was going to look over his collection that evening; he was wearing gloves. He had taken out this deck, possibly to check some detail of design. The murderer entered. Garnett, unnoticed by his executioner, set the pack aside. Later, when the murderer was looking for a card for his false clue, he saw this well-worn deck, thought it an ordinary one, and used it. Both he and you, Mr. O'Breen, should have realized that a worn common deck is not usually arranged in suits and order."

"But all this is psychological," Jackson objected. "You can't use it as evidence."

"I know that, although it convinced me. But the murderer's other slip was far more serious. Fingerprints, it is true, can be forged—*but not the equally telltale pores of the skin.*"

Jackson swore comprehensively. "I'm an idiot! You were so infernally specious, Fergus, that I let that slip by me. Then it must be—"

"Exactly. Mr. O'Breen's description of the murderer fitted Humphrey Garnett very neatly; but it tallies even more closely with—Richard Vinton."

Kay was numb now; she seemed almost oblivious to what was happening. Camilla stared at Vinton in dark horror. Max Farrington shifted uneasily in his chair.

Jackson rose and crossed to the actor. "And what have you got to say?"

"Nothing, Lieutenant. Why should I? It's absurd. Does the old boy mean I actually went out of my way *to frame myself?*"

"I mean just that, Vinton. You knew that if Garnett were killed, as he had to be if you were to marry and inherit his fortune before he made sure of your identity, you would be an obvious suspect—particularly since I was certain to come out here for the funeral and expose your past record. So you took good care that you would be instantly suspected, and then released when it became obvious that the evidence was framed against you.

"You weren't sure if the police would detect that frame-up, so you had Kay engage a private investigator. If that too had failed and you were brought to trial, you could have had a brainstorm and convinced your attorney of the supposed plot against you. It would have made an excellent defense. That, in fact, would have been your best bet; for if you were once acquitted, nothing discovered later could have been brought against you.

"There were other advantages, too, to this arrest and exoneration. It meant excellent publicity and the renewal of your contract. Moreover, you were possibly a trifle worried about the unspoken rivalry of Bill Harding; standing in peril of your life would, you knew, rivet Kay's affection and loyalty to you."

Rand's speech was interrupted by a strange sound. It was neither weeping nor laughter; it was more like a sound which The O'Breens of old might have heard in a banshee-haunted castle. He realized that it came from

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Kay, and he almost regretted his sense of duty.

Camilla rose. "You'll excuse us," she said gently. With her arm around Kay's throbbing shoulders, she helped the shattered girl into the house.

Vinton scarcely heeded her departure. He faced Jackson with that bravado so characteristic of him. "And are you going to arrest me on this fantastic notion?"

"Fantastic or not, I am. If you'd had the good sense to admit you'd seen Garnett later that night, so that he could have got you to handle the glass, you might have gotten away with it; but you tried to make us think the prints were forged, and the pores blow that idea higher than seven kites. You're under arrest, all right."

Vinton laughed. "Seven kites is nothing to how high we'll blow your theory in court. What do you say, Farrington?"

The lawyer had risen and was holding his hat tentatively. "I don't know, Vinton. You see, this is a little out of my line. Hanley Brock's a very good man for this sort of thing. You'd better see him."

"And that," Fergus said, when Vinton had been taken away and he and Rand sat alone, "is what did it. Brock's never defended an innocent man in his life; that just meant that Farrington knew his client was guiltier than the Devil himself." The cheerfulness slowly died out of his voice. He wasn't pacing now; he was just slumped in a chair.

"Lord, I made a fool of myself," he groaned. "It was all so clever and all just what I was supposed to see. I'm an idiot. But why should I be sorry for myself? There's Kay to think about. This has broken her up completely."

"I don't know. She can help nurse Harding; that will take her mind off this trouble a little. And in time . . ." Rand smiled softly. "Of course, Vinton was far more glamorous. An actor and all that. But you've noticed how, even in the midst of all this, she always showed concern for Bill Harding? And it would be so much simpler if he were to carry on his researches here—there's the laboratory and everything. A perfect setting for a scientist and his wife."

Fergus perked up a little. "You know, it might work out at that. I wonder if the Sallice would stay on here. Interesting wench, that."

"You Irish are mercurial. From dejection at professional failure to wondering about wenches. Well, young man, I wish you luck—both ways. And don't feel downhearted. In all my experience, I can't recall a more difficult case."

"In all your experience? I didn't know detective work was a regular part of Army training."

"Well, you see, I was in the Intelligence Service." Rand relit his still glowing cigar in modest embarrassment. "Acting Head of the Bureau in Washington for a while."

"Why didn't you tell me? Why did you let me—"

"Because I thought you were on the right track. I was astounded when you went so completely wrong at the end. I'm retired. Glory means nothing to me now. I was content to stay in the background and watch you get off to what I thought would be a most promising professional start. In fact,

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young man, I still think so. You're all right. Potentially, I think you are an excellent detective."

Fergus was himself again. "By the bones of the holy prophet Malachi, Colonel, I think you're right." He began to pace again. "On my next case, sir, I promise you, you'll be confounded by what The O'Breen can do."

Colonel Rand smiled, hoped, uttered a brief silent prayer, and concluded by going harrumph.

Fergus halted and extended his hand. "Look, sir. You've been swell. Thank you. And as you ought to know, simplicity means more from an Irishman than all the blarney in Eire. And now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll see what the Sallice is doing tonight."

He dashed off. Youth is indeed a strange and wonderful thing, Rand reflected, and fell to thinking of Alicia Willowe until the ash fell from his neglected cigar.

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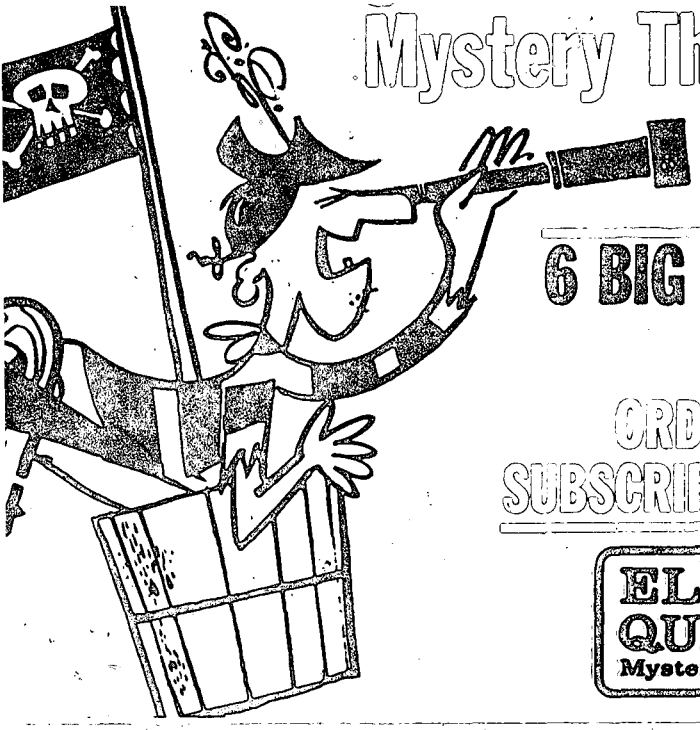

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